

## WINCHESTER HANDICRAFT SOCIETY

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>



In 1907, the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts, credited as the first arts and crafts organization in the country, celebrated its tenth anniversary with an exhibition in Copley Hall, an exhibit including works by Winchester craftsmen.

Seven of the exhibitors in 1907 were from Winchester (and one more was a teacher in its high school), which may not seem a large number but was greater than that from most other suburban communities. At that time, in fact, Winchester had its own Handicraft Society.

The purpose of the BSAC was "to develop and encourage higher standards in the handicrafts." These standards, along with the survival of the crafts themselves, had been threatened in the nineteenth century with the availability of cheap factory-manufactured goods. Spreading from England to New England, the Arts and Crafts movement advocated for individually crafted everyday objects that could be beautiful as well as useful. It attracted architects, artists, educators, craftspeople, and collectors

### MURPHY HEADS HANDICRAFT SOCIETY IN WINCHESTER



*Hermann Dudley Murphy  
self-portrait*

The emergence of a Handicraft Society in Winchester may be credited to the artist Hermann Dudley, whom the newspaper called "the head and front of the undertaking"<sup>2</sup> and who gathered local craftspeople together and drew others in.

When Murphy and his wife, the artist Caroline Bowles, moved to Winchester in 1897, the town already had several resident artists and craftspeople. The aged sculptor Edward Brackett was still living on Highland Avenue. Among others, there were also the painter Helen Pressey; artist William H. W. Bicknell; jewelry-maker Catherine Folsom (like Pressey a Winchester native); Annie Nowell, both an artist and a decorator of wood (e.g., frames, book ends, card boxes, and magazine holders); Rufus Crowell, a master craftsman in metalworking though professionally employed in pharmaceuticals; amateur needleworker Ella Kelley; and weaver Josephine Jenkins.

Though some of these, like Crowell, Nowell, and Folsom, were members of the Boston Society of Arts & Crafts, it took Murphy's appearance for them to band together in a handicraft society in their home town. Murphy, a professional, was the first president, and Jenkins, a skilled amateur, the first vice-president.

Also associated with this undertaking, acting as the group's first treasurer, was Frederick W. Coburn. Originally an art student and then an art teacher, Coburn developed a career writing about the arts, working during his Winchester years (1903-1917) as art critic for the *Boston Herald*. Though apparently not a craftsman himself, he championed handicrafts in a number of magazine articles.

Murphy's craft was carved picture and mirror frames, one he adopted due to the influence of James McNeil Whistler, whom he met in Paris before settling in Winchester, and of Charles Prendergast.

According to Coburn, "The first serious attempt in this country to restore the picture frame to something of its old-time honour and to introduce the spirit of individual artistic responsibility appears to have originated one summer several years ago amongst a little colony of artists on Cape Cod. Mr. Murphy and Mr. Prendergast, both Boston painters, were of the party, and conversations on the subject of framing pictures, together with fulminations against the methods of the picture dealers, led to a suggestion that... an occasional artist, if willing to acquaint himself with the details of the craft, might properly make frames for others. ... Mr. Prendergast began shortly after to acquire the requisite knowledge and to produce frames which have become very familiar in the exhibitions of the past two years. Mr. Murphy started not long after, and soon became in many respects the commanding figure of the movement. Several other artists have since taken up similar lines of work so that now there is a distinct 'Boston group' of framemakers."<sup>3</sup>

What Coburn called a "Boston group" was for a time also partly a Winchester group. It was in Winchester that Murphy started up a frame-making business. A year after Murphy moved to Winchester, so also did Charles and Maurice Prendergast. In 1903, the Murphys moved into a new home on Highland Avenue called Carrig Rohane in whose basement Murphy, Charles Prendergast, and Walfred Thulin created what became the Carrig Rohane Frame Shop

Although the Prendergast brothers soon moved back to Boston, they participated in Murphy's shop, designing and crafting picture frames of wood, gesso, and gold leaf. One of the Prendergasts' first commissions was from Winchester resident Thomas Lawson.

Another artist/framemaker, Dawson Dawson-Watson, may have come to Winchester to associate with Murphy, being in residence in a cottage on Highland Avenue not far from the Murphys in 1904, but he left that same year to take a position in St. Louis.

In 1906, the cottage he vacated became home to another framemaker, Martha Page. BSAC Secretary Frederick Allen Whiting noted in a review of the 1907 exhibition, that Page “shares with Miss [Estelle] Nast [sister of Condé Nast] a charming cottage in Winchester, Massachusetts. While Miss Nast is busy with her painting in a studio on the first floor, Miss Page is occupied at her bench in an upper room designing, carving, gilding, coloring and burnishing the charming miniature, mirror and picture frames and the graceful candlesticks upon which her reputation as a successful craftswoman is based. It seems an ideal form of co-operation which brings these two busy young women together in so successful a combination of their various gifts.”<sup>4</sup>

Page and Nast were among the seven from Winchester who exhibited in 1907, along with the Murphys, Jenkins, Nowell, and Crowell. Page, a North Carolina native, was a craftswoman of apparent promise. She was an officer of the BSAC Woodworkers Guild when it was organized and Murphy was its president. She exhibited at the Winchester Handicraft Society as well as the BSAC. Unfortunately her career ended with her untimely death following a serious operation in 1911 at about age 36.

Woodworking was only one craft followed in Winchester. At the same time the Prendergasts moved to Winchester so also did the versatile artist Addison B. LeBoutillier, occupying the house next to the Prendergasts on Walnut Street.

A member of the BSAC, LeBoutillier was an etcher, engraver, wood carver, painter, architect, and pottery designer. In 1901, he became director of design for Grueby Pottery. Although he, like the Prendergasts, moved away before the formation of the Winchester Handicraft Society, it was perhaps due to his acquaintance with Murphy that Grueby Pottery lent numerous tiles and vases for a Winchester Handicraft Society exhibit in 1908.

But the Winchester Handicraft Society did not succeed because of the artists in Murphy’s circle who moved quickly in and out of Winchester. It succeeded due to those already rooted in the town who made it fertile ground for an arts and crafts society. In Winchester Murphy found other woodworkers, plus metalworkers, weavers, needleworkers, potters, decorators, and, print makers, both professionals and amateurs, as well collectors and others interested in taking the classes or simply in helping out. There was true enthusiasm for the undertaking when the Handicraft Society was organized in 1906.

## **HANDICRAFT SOCIETY UNITES CRAFTSPEOPLE**

One of the brightest social events of 1906 was the first exhibition of the Winchester Handicraft Society, organized that January in Hermann Dudley Murphy’s studio on Highland Avenue.

The object of the society, its constitution reportedly stated, was “to encourage among its members artistic expression in the arts and crafts and to promote in the community a better understanding of the handicraft movement.”

The members were to be of two classes: “craftsmen members who must be or must have been actively engaged in some sort of handicraft work, and associate members who to be acceptable must be generally interested in the objects of the society.”<sup>5</sup>

Membership was open to all for a small annual fee and was not restricted to residents of Winchester. In 1908, members numbered about 75.

The Society was governed by a council. The first officers were Hermann Dudley Murphy, president; Josephine Jenkins, vice president; and Frederick W. Coburn, secretary. Gustave Rogers, head of the arts and crafts department of the school in the Worcester art museum, offered classes in metalwork and weaving.



*The Episcopal Church, later used by the Handicraft Society, showing the Skillings home to the right. The building was demolished in 1977.*

A most appropriate location was found for the Society’s first shop, the little Arts and Crafts style Episcopal Church across from Town Hall, next to the Aberjona River. Designed by George Rand, it was used by the Parish of the Epiphany from 1885 until its new church on Church Street opened in 1905.

The old church was slated for demolition, but public opinion, stimulated by the artists of the town, staved off its destruction. The owner, David N. Skillings, gave the place rent free to the Handicraft Society for its headquarters. In March, the Society had a table at a bazaar in Horticultural Hall held by the Federation of Women’s Clubs of New England, under the chairmanship of Mrs. Murphy,<sup>6</sup> but the Society’s first exhibition was held at its new center in June 1906.



*Interior of the Handicraft building while used as a church*

This first exhibit reportedly drew many prominent members of the Arts and Crafts Society of Boston, artists and crafts workers from surrounding communities, and “a large number of Winchester society people.”

Exhibited were hammered copper, silver, and brass, needlework, hand woven and hooked rugs, embroidery, pierced brass, pottery, burnt wood, jewelry, wood frames, brass work, leaded glass, and teakwood carving.

Many items were crafted by members of the Society; others were lent from local collections, including many loaned by Mrs. Samuel W. McCall. There was an exhibit of Grueby pottery and a display of woven Sabatos rugs by Marion Volk of Maine (wife of Coburn's art teacher during his student days in New York).

Reportedly, on the opening night "the hall was filled with guests, all of whom were loud in their praise of the fine work shown."<sup>7</sup>

Twenty of the exhibitors were mentioned by name in the local news report. Among the professionals, Murphy himself exhibited, along with Caroline Murphy (metalwork), Martha Page (miniature frames and candlesticks), Catherine Folsom Jameson (metalwork), and Annie Nowell (burnt wood). The painter Daphne Dunbar was also associated with the exhibit, though not named as an exhibitor.

Amateur craftspeople also exhibited, some probably displaying their class work. The records of the Handicraft Society have not survived, but information gleaned from newspaper reports and other sources, though incomplete, reveals a diverse group with diverse interests.

In addition to the professional artists or artisans, a couple of members, like Edward Waite, were architects. A couple were journalists. Others were amateurs who just dabbled in a craft for a short time. Yet others were amateurs who were accomplished and respected craftspeople, like Rufus Crowell (metalwork), Caroline Jewett (metalwork), and Ella Kelley (needlework), all listed in the National Directory of Workers in the Artistic Crafts of 1906/07.

Families became involved as associate and exhibiting members, such as the families of James F. Dorsey, who worked for the Pacific Mills at Lawrence, and of William S. Forbes, who established the Forbes Lithograph Manufacturing Company and married the sister of Louis Prang. Rev. Suter, whose congregation had previously used the handicraft shop, was interested, as was his wife Helen and her sister. Edwin Ginn's wife and at least one sister-in-law were active social and craftsman members. Helen Means, wife of another minister and sister of the architect Robert Coit, counted the Handicraft Society among her chief interests.

## **SECOND EXHIBITION**

The Society's second exhibit was held two years later, by which time the board had changed, the shop had moved, and a new emphasis was placed on education.

Sylvester H. Taylor, the new president, was a business man whose experience was not in art but rather in mining in Mexico, asphalt in New York City, spring water from Vermont, and marble in Massachusetts. The artist William H. Warren Bicknell took over as vice-president. The treasurer was Ella Kelley, a member of the Needlework Guild of America. The secretary was Minnie Ely, a former president of the Fortnightly (Winchester's women's club, one of the most influential groups in town). Murphy remained a member of the council, as did Coburn.

The Society had to move due to the Christian Scientists' wanting to rent the church building. The crafts group moved to the new high school after the superintendent approved a plan whereby a room would be provided in exchange for the Society offering free instruction in its classes to the public school teachers of drawing and industrial training plus allowing student use of its equipment.

Taylor was enthusiastic in press reports about offering young people the opportunity to learn crafts, stating that Winchester was a pioneer in incorporating craftsmanship in the public school curriculum. In 1908, the Society offered classes in metalwork, wood carving, and weaving and textile work.

The second exhibition, held at the high school, included a number of metal pieces such as salt cellars, copper bowls, bronze vases, brass candlesticks, and jewelry, plus wood carvings, and examples of hand-woven rungs, pottery, baskets, embroidery, and book-binding. Again the exhibit combined works by members with others lent from collections and crafts centers.

A notable event in 1908, a month after the exhibit, was a lecture by Frederic Allen Whiting, Secretary of the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts. He gave a résumé of the Arts and Crafts movement and examples of accomplishments and inveighed against the current misuse of the term, "misunderstood by many people as referring to a kind of furniture which is so heavy that you have to hire a porter to move it from the dining room to the hall." He reportedly made "frequent references to Winchester's opportunity," including the arrangement with the high school.<sup>8</sup>



*Cloisonné enamel pendant  
by Millicent Strange*

That fall, the Society essayed monthly meetings combining tea and exhibits. A meeting in October featured textiles. In December, the focus was on Japanese art with Murphy giving an informal talk to members. Unfortunately, after 1908 news items on the Society almost ceased, leaving a mystery as to whether this ambitious schedule was sustained or not.

In 1909, the Society announced the hiring of Millicent Strange<sup>9</sup> as resident instructor in crafts and design. A member of the National Society of Craftsmen, Strange had taught applied art and design in her native England and in America. President Taylor stated, "Our society is the only craftsman's association in the country, so far as we know, having a resident instructor attached to its workshop, and members should take advantage of this opportunity to obtain instruction from so competent a teacher."<sup>10</sup>

The annual exhibition in 1909 was reportedly "the best exhibition the Society has held so far." Fewer craftspeople were mentioned by name in the news report, which featured

the work by Strange and by Margaret Hill, supervisor of art instruction in the Winchester schools, and noted “one very interesting table...which shows the work of the high school pupils who are taking the arts and crafts course,” including tooled leather in original design, metalwork in copper and brass, and some silk scarves ornamented with stenciled design.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the enthusiasm expressed for the alliance with the high school, the arrangement did not last long. At the end of the school year in 1910, the Society moved again and Strange left Winchester. Arts and crafts were taught at the high school, but apparently not in conjunction with the Society.

The Society’s new home was a room at 522 Main St. above a cobbler’s shop. Over the summer the room was open Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. After October, it was announced, the room was to be open every day of the week and to be in charge of “a competent teacher of various crafts.”<sup>12</sup> However, it is unknown who, if anyone, became that teacher.



*Last known home of the Winchester Handicraft Society at 522 Main St., across from Converse Place*

At the end of 1910, the newspaper carried an announcement of a photography exhibition and contest. A \$5 gold piece along with a certificate was to be awarded to an amateur photographer. But no news followed about any prize or exhibit.

The Society appears to have petered out. In 1916, the building on Main Street was reportedly vacant. Murphy moved to Lexington after his marriage ended in 1915 and he remarried. Taylor died in 1915. Coburn left Winchester in 1917, and Jenkins was living in Boston by that same year. Bicknell, with Taylor’s assistance, was involved with his own cherished dream, the Winchester Orchestral Society, which performed in Town Hall from 1909 through 1917.

With or without a society, however, Winchester had its arts and crafts. It was even felt that they were part of civic improvement.

## **HANDICRAFTS & CIVIC IMPROVEMENT**

In 1910, four years after the Winchester Handicraft Society was formed, the most prominent advocate of civic improvement in town, also a champion of arts and crafts, was actually a transplant from Chicago.

This was the sociologist Charles Zueblin, a Winchester resident from 1910 until his death in Switzerland in 1925. A sociology teacher at the University of Chicago from 1892 to 1908, Zueblin was active in social reform and civic welfare projects, founded the Northwestern

University Settlement, and was president of the American League for Civic Improvement, among other activities. Among the clubs to which he belonged were the National Arts Club and the Chicago Arts and Crafts Society.

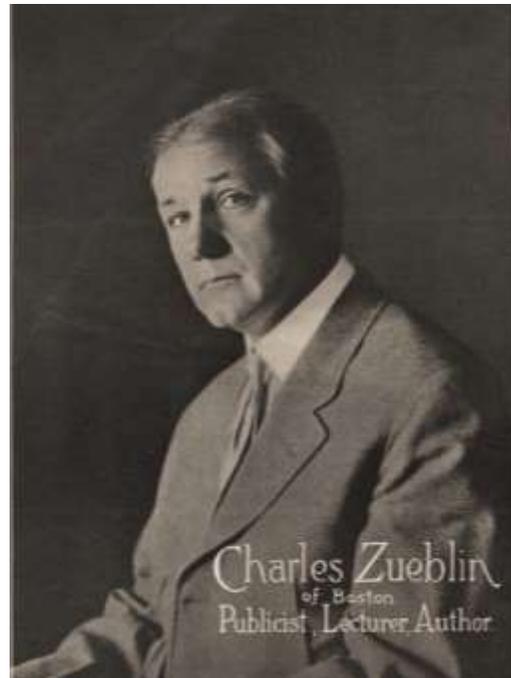
The Arts and Crafts Society in Chicago was formed just a few months after Boston's in 1897. It was organized at Hull House, a settlement house whose main purpose was to provide social and educational opportunities for working class people. The aims of the Arts and Crafts Society varied from encouraging beauty in everyday things, handicraft, influencing the manual-training movement, and holding exhibits and founding centers for crafts activities. Arts and crafts were viewed not just as leisure activities but also as vocational training and as a means of attaining a higher standard in life.

On moving in 1910 to Winchester (where he moved into the former home of artist Edmund Garrett), Zueblin devoted most of his time to writing and lecturing. In his first year residing in town, the Fortnightly arranged a series of four lectures on civic improvement. While he did not speak about arts and crafts, he made many comments on aesthetics and civic ideals which would have resonated with supporters of the Handicraft Society.

The Winchester Handicraft Society was formed at a time that Winchester was consciously improving itself, its appearance, its amenities, and its society.

"No phase of city making speaks more eloquently of the change in American ideals than the growth of parks, playgrounds and boulevards," Zueblin told his Winchester audience.<sup>13</sup> In the 1890s, Winchester had replaced an unsightly industrial site and unhealthy swamp below the town center with a parkway and park, the beginning of a local parks movement.

"The most important public building is the schoolhouse, because each neighborhood contains one and the future citizens are consciously recognizing there the aesthetic ideas which will guide the coming generations," Zueblin said. Just six years earlier, Winchester's new high school had opened, a handsome Beaux Arts structure, not only well designed aesthetically but also constructed along modern hygienic lines.



Zueblin further said, "If our present desire for civic beauty does not go below the surface, does not make us change the social conditions, it will be all fuss and feathers."<sup>14</sup> During the two decades before this, Winchester had seen a home for the indigent elderly established, the Visiting Nurse Association organized to provide healthcare for the poor (inspired by a woman who later became a member of the Handicraft Society), discussions started about a hospital,

and efforts made throughout the district to improve the health of children from poor families. More improvements were underway or contemplated to improve the appearance, health, education, welfare, and standards of the community.

While the constitution and exhibition reports of the Winchester Handicraft Society may make it appear that the group had only the one aim—to make life more beautiful by making everyday things more beautiful—that was not all that individual members saw in handicrafts.

Some members were particularly interested in fostering creativity in children and in instilling respect for labor and pride of workmanship in youth. Council member Josef Sandberg (artist Edward Brackett's son-in-law), for example, was a proponent of manual training as a teacher and later principal of the Sloyd Training School in Boston.

A social committee member, Elinor Barta was apparently not a craftswoman herself but was interested in the Society first as a kindergarten teacher and then as manager and later proprietor of girls camps where crafts were important recreations.

Another Society council member, Margaret Hill was a drawing teacher in the Winchester schools for seven years. When she left, it was to be in charge of handicrafts at McLean Hospital, where weaving and modeling were used as occupational therapy.

Similar to the Chicago Arts and Crafts Society, the founders of the Handicraft Society recognized a range of benefits to arts and crafts. They saw a direct link between the arts and civic improvement. This is witnessed by an informal meeting held at the home of Edwin Ginn in Oct. 1906, nine months after the Society was founded, attended by a number of members of the Society and other citizens interested in matters of town improvement.

Hermann Dudley Murphy, a founder of the Society, spoke of the its aim and accomplishments and also of opportunities for broadening the work, for example, with art exhibitions, lectures, high-grade musical entertainments and other features which would bring people together to further improve the appearance of the town.

Ginn reportedly agreed that many other things ought to be done to continue “to attract a desirable class of new residents and that the children of all classes or citizens may grow up in the midst of the most favorable possible environment.”<sup>15</sup>

A committee was appointed to consult with the recently formed merchants' association and other local organizations and to consider ways and means of allying the Society with a broader movement for town improvement. Discussed was a possible new organization to look at various phases of local betterment, such as the appearance of parks and streets, regulations under which houses are built, popular evening lecture courses, musical entertainments and the like.

Nothing apparently came of these discussions at that time as far as a new organization. However, individual members, acting independently of the Society, contributed to welfare and

social reform within the town. For example, artist/craftswoman Annie Nowell was active with the Women's Suffrage movement. Painter Helen Pressey was for a time director of the Home for Aged People.

In 1911, it was reported that "both Mr. and Mrs. Murphy rank with the most public spirited people in Winchester."<sup>16</sup> Art critic Frederick Coburn, secretary of the Winchester Handicraft Society, also secretary of the Copley Society of Boston, press representative of the New England Conservatory of Music, and a director of the Lowell Art Association, was also a member of the executive committee of the Fabian Club of Boston, his interest in socialism having dated back to his college days.

Ironically, Winchester's Handicraft Society appeared to be fading while Zueblin was shining on the lecture circuit. However, interest in crafts themselves was certainly not dying out. The next lecture topic upon which Zueblin spoke for the Fortnightly was William Morris (unfortunately not reported in the newspaper).

Artists and craftsmen, though they came and went, never disappeared from Winchester. When Zueblin moved to Winchester, so also did his mother Henrietta, an expert craftsman in ceramics. Among the American exhibitors in the International Universal Exposition, Paris, in 1900, she also exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago and became a masters member of the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts.

For another example, Norman Mitchell, accounted a master craftsman according to a 1916 *Who's Who Among Craftsmen*, moved to Winchester and set up a jewelry business in 1915. Unfortunately, without a handicraft center and public exhibitions, the history of Winchester's craftspeople becomes more difficult to trace.

In later year, arts societies emerged again. After the nation was plunged into the Great Depression, the Fortnightly held painting classes which formed the basis for the Studio Guild. The library trustees encouraged the formation of the Winchester Art Association, relying for guidance on Murphy, the Handicraft Society's founder. And the idea that the arts and culture go hand-in-hand with civic improvement is one which runs through the history of the town up through the present time.

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2018 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Aug. 28-30, 2013. This article supersedes all previous articles.

<sup>2</sup> *Boston Globe*, July 8, 1906

<sup>3</sup> *The International Studio*, Volume 30.

<sup>4</sup> *Good Housekeeping*, Vol. 45.

<sup>5</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Jan. 26, 1906

<sup>6</sup> *The Winchester Star*, March 9, 1906.

<sup>7</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Jun. 6, 1906

<sup>8</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Apr. 24, 1908.

<sup>9</sup> Strange was profiled by Helen Wright in "Miss Millicent Strange and Her Work," *The International Studio*, Nov. 1913. The pendant pictured here was an illustration in that article.

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<sup>10</sup> *Boston Transcript*, Oct 5, 1909.

<sup>11</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Nov. 19, 1909.

<sup>12</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Sept. 23, 1910.

<sup>13</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Dec. 16, 1910.

<sup>14</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Nov. 18, 1910.

<sup>15</sup> *The Winchester Star*, October 26, 1906.

<sup>16</sup> *The Winchester Star*, May 2, 1911.