

*Drapery fabric in gray and blue exhibited by Georgia B. Chingren of Sioux City, Iowa, at the Decorative Arts and Ceramics Exhibition sponsored by The Wichita Art Association, Wichita, Kansas, last spring. In the warp, the five bands on either side of the center are repeated units of heavy gray pearl, gray rayon nub, and blue rayon irregular, two inches wide and threaded in basket weave, separated by one inch bands of alternate threads of fine gray pearl and a heavier white linen nub, threaded as a single unit in herringbone. The wide center band repeats the one inch bands. The main weft thread is the same blue rayon irregular as used in the warp, woven with twill treadling, with eight overshots of a heavy gray rayon nub after every two inches.*



*Drapery fabric by Claire Freeman, shown at the 46th Annual Exhibition of the New York Society of Craftsmen at the Barbizon Plaza Hotel. The fabric presents a contrast of dull and gleaming tones of green, woven with a rayon warp and a weft of cotton twisted with rayon. The heavy threads in relief are of gold. Miss Freeman teaches weaving at the Craft Students League of the YWCA in New York City and at the Westchester Workshop, County Center, White Plains, New York. The pottery was exhibited by Roberta Leber, president of the New York Society of Craftsmen, who teaches ceramics at the Craft Students League.*



*Weaving in the Fiftieth Anniversary Exhibition of The Society of Arts and Crafts featured in windows of Filene's Department Store, Boston.*

# The Society of Arts and Crafts of Boston, Massachusetts

## —Now 53 Years Old

By KATE VAN CLEVE

THE Society of Arts and Crafts of Boston, Massachusetts, oldest craft cooperative in the United States, although widely known as the "Boston Society," is in reality a national institution with its more than 600 craftsmen members scattered over the country. Throughout its 53 years of existence, the Society has exerted a strong influence upon the development of handicrafts in the United States because of its insistence upon standards of quality, its jury system for the selection of members and their work which it sells, and the participation of both the organization and its individual members in widespread craft activities.

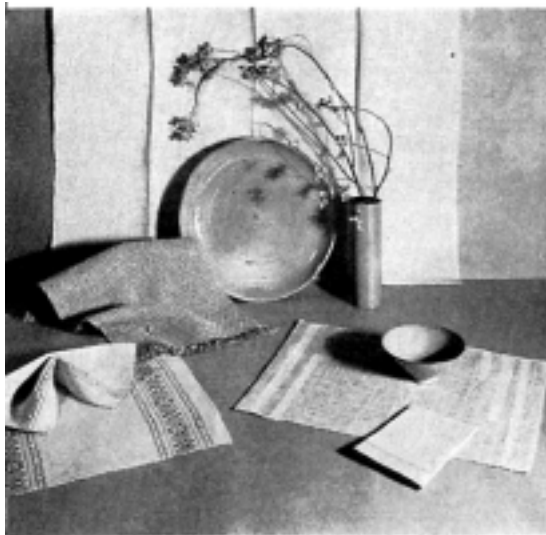
The Society was organized because of the interest aroused by the first exhibition of American arts and crafts ever held in the United States, in Copley Hall, Boston, April 3, 1897. Henry Louis Johnson, a young printing craftsman of Boston, had become intensely interested in the revival of handicrafts in France

and in England, where William Morris and John Ruskin were leaders. He succeeded in interesting a group of well-known Bostonians, including artists, architects, trustees of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and others, in his idea for an American exhibition. It was believed that an exhibition of this kind would have an important effect upon the development of the arts in the United States and a far-reaching influence upon the encouragement of individual effort, as well as help to create a demand for better-designed articles in common use. Along with the work of American craftsmen designs for carpets by William Morris were shown.

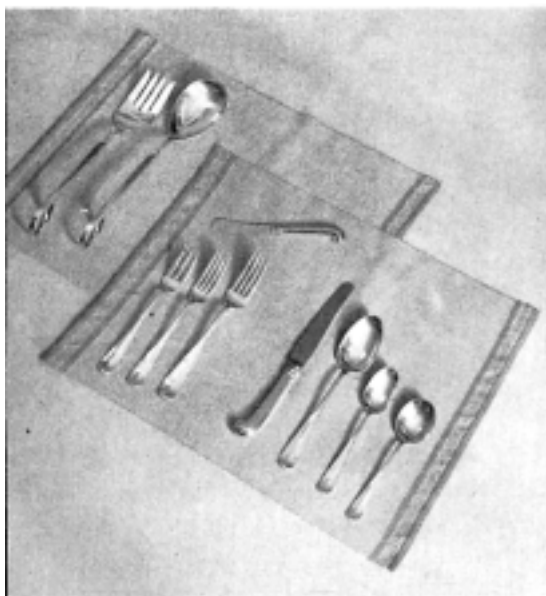
Following this exhibition, the Society was formed in 1897, with Charles Eliot Norton, professor of the history of art at Harvard University, as president. Of Professor Norton, often called the John Ruskin of America, it was said that "few Americans were sterner critics of whatever in American life fell below the

ideal standard." As a consequence he was accused many times of being unpatriotic because of his criticism of certain American tendencies, although no man was in reality more devoted to the interests of his country. His great purpose was to bring about not only improved standards of production but improvement in all phases of American life.

The aims of the Society of Arts and Crafts, quoting from the first president, were stated in the following words: "The Society of Arts and Crafts is incorporated for the purpose of promoting artistic work in all branches of handicraft. It hopes to bring designers and workmen into mutually helpful relations and to encourage workmen to execute designs of their own. It endeavors to stimulate in workmen an appreciation of the dignity and value of good design; to counteract the popular impatience of Law and Form and the desire for over-ornamentation and



*Typical handwoven linens and pottery.*



*Silver made by the Society's members.*



*Woven woolen scarfs and ties.*

specious originality. It will insist upon the necessity of sobriety and restraint, of ordered arrangement, of due regard for the relation between the form of an object and its use, and of harmony and fitness in the decoration put upon it." These ideals are unchanged today.

From the beginning the Society's approach to the encouragement of fine craftsmanship has been on a practical as well as an esthetic basis. A salesroom was opened on Somerset Street in 1900, three years after the Society was organized, because it was felt, to quote Mrs. Henry Whitman, one of the charter members of the Society, that "with the substantial increase in membership, especially among the craftsmen, there was a need for some depot where examples of craftsmanship could be seen; also the need of an agent to provide a market and mobilize the forces of the Society." In short, the Society was interested in enabling the craftsmen to make a living and, to help bring that about, a salesroom had become necessary. Frederic Allen Whiting was appointed secretary, treasurer and manager of the new shop. The first jury was appointed the same year because it was believed that only the best work of the craftsmen should be offered to the public. In the course of years, more than \$4,000,000 of craft work has been sold.

It was at this time that the plan of having three classes of craftsmanship was worked out: craftsman, master craftsman, and associate. At present in order to become a master craftsman in weaving applicants must be able to:

1. Warp and thread a loom to weave at least three types of harness weaving, besides overshot, submitting draft, layout, a record sheet and woven article for each type chosen.

2. Submit samples of four of following weaves—embroidery or finger weaving, Swedish (dukagang), French embroidery weave (Greek origin). Laid in, often spoken of as shadow weaving, Russian, looped Spanish net.

3. Analyze a given fabric and make a draft for it. Plan a suitable border for a given draft. Submit draft and woven article.

The proper use of color and practical

usefulness of all articles submitted must be demonstrated.

Later the award of Medalist was added and the first medal was given in 1913. To date sixty-five medals have been awarded. To be a Medalist is the highest honor that can be given to a craftsman in this country, in the opinion of many. The year 1904 gave the Society a national standing which it had not hitherto achieved. Fifty-eight members exhibited almost 500 articles at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, and won 27 of the 49 medals awarded for applied arts. Mr. Whiting was asked to take charge of all the applied arts exhibits and also was made a member of the International Jury of Award. The most valuable result of this exhibition was the establishment of a standard of judgment which no section of the country could say was provincial, or local; and as far as the Society was concerned, craftsmen all over the country began to apply for membership.

Probably one of the best ways of showing the growth of the Society is to look back to some of the exhibitions it has held. In 1911 we find an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in honor of the meeting in Boston of the National League of Handicraft Societies. Design and craftsmanship had improved over the fourteen years of the Society's existence. The Twenty-fifth Anniversary Exhibition was also held in the Museum of Fine Arts and attracted visitors from all over the country.

April 7, 1947, brought the Fiftieth Anniversary Exhibition, this time in the many windows on three sides of Filene's Department Store where it truly became the peoples' exhibit. The exhibit drew its material from several hundred members in all sections of the United States.

As from the beginning, all the work was passed on by the Jury of the Society and it is through the untiring efforts of the Jury members that the high standard of design, usefulness and craftsmanship has been attained.

This exhibit included fine pottery, silverware, leather work, needlework, bobbin lace, stained glass, furniture and weaving. The latter made a wonderful background for other crafts, the tweeds, wall hangings and luncheon sets blend-



Left—View of present showroom at 145 Newbury Street. Right, Part of the Worcester Museum's Exhibition of New England Handicrafts, shown in the upper gallery at 32 Newbury Street in 1944.

ing or in contrasting harmony to objects placed upon or in front of them.

No article on the Society would be complete without mentioning a very few of the architects and craftsmen whose untiring efforts have made this Society what it is today—an internationally known organization for high standards of craftsmanship.

C. Howard Walker, an architect, was a charter member of the Society and served it in many capacities but probably is best known, not as president or vice-president, but as critic of the jury, ready to aid any craftsman with wise and helpful words of encouragement.

It seems to me that the following principles, given as a guide by Mr. Walker himself, can still be a help to us all:

*"First*—That styles as such are not credentials of merit, but that styles recognized as the best achievements of their times, have been sifted until their best elements alone remain and are instructive as to methods, manners and underlying fundamentals, and therefore worthy of study, and tend to curb the erratic and futile attempts of ignorance and steady floundering efforts.

*"Second*—That time in hours or days spent upon work is no gauge of its money value, nor of its intrinsic value. Facility and speed increase with study and application, and if accompanied by attained skill, time spent is negligible and not a factor of merit in the work.

*"Third*—Every material has a simplest and best and usually an easiest power of expression which constitutes its capacity and should be controlled by

its limitations, and it is manifest that the workers who appreciate these facts and acknowledge them will have removed all unnecessary experimental obstacles.

"It is futile to attempt to imitate one material in that of another. To what good end does it tend 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's.'

"The same is true in regard to methods of workmanship and to the purposes for which the objects are to be used.

"Wrought work is wrought work and cast work is cast work for all time; and while the cast work can and is brought to the perfection of some wrought work, the latter can always be made to excel it. Plating inferior metal with superior is justifiable.

"People have an idea that novelty is in itself an artistic asset, which is not the case. The unusual and bizarre make an appeal and the incredible excites admiration. If these occur within the natural proclivities of the materials, other merits may condone them, otherwise they are undesirable eccentricities of the calibre of puns.

*"Fourth*—Associated suggestion always makes an appeal. It gives speech to objects of art. It has a large gamut, from symbolism in its simplest terms to sculptured representation. . . . It is a most valuable factor in design, and a designer should acquaint himself with symbols and their conventional shorthand expression in nature and in man's avocations, and have a good vocabulary of these terms. They have concentrated power which realistic representation lacks.

*"Fifth*—The first and last law of Design is Order, meaning arrangement of factors, with consequent relative pro-

portions in all three dimensions and it can be simple. As elaboration increases it rapidly becomes a *tour de force*—a stunt."

Charles J. Connick also was never too busy to stop to help a craftsman with design and color, the latter such a vital part of his own craft—stained glass. Let me quote from Mr. Connick: "Every material has its own declarations of truth to make to the craftsman who would fashion from it things of usefulness and beauty. The character of material dictates terms to every sincere and intelligent designer and worker. We are helped to understand those terms by association with other craftsmen and enthusiastic acquaintance with great museum collections and with good books."

Depression and war have had little effect on the steady progress of the Boston organization. Following the First World War there was a great expansion in activities of the Society and increase in membership and a heavy demand for the members' work. The same conditions held true both during and after World War II.

In 1944, the Society reported that customers were prepared to purchase far more than was offered them. Sales were then running \$120,000 annually, which required an \$80,000 inventory. In the *Bulletin* of that year, the following statement appeared: "Your Society has a unique and impressive standing among handicraft organizations in the country.

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# The Boston Society of Arts and Crafts

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There is no other quite like it—certainly none with sales matching our own. The reputation of the society carries definite responsibilities. We must guard against any impairment or injury to it. Certainly we may not lower our standards in order to attract work which might sell. In the long run the level of craftsmanship depends upon the abilities of our craftsmen. As a national organization this level is higher than it would be in a local or state organization."

In 1946 the Society was forced to find new quarters and is now located at 145 Newbury Street, Boston, Massachusetts, where one can find an interesting display of articles coming from craftsmen all over the country. Pottery from Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Vermont, and California. Silver, both flat and hollow-ware, from many New England craftsmen. Jewelry both silver and gold, with precious and semi-precious stones, will be found in the case of the salesroom so well lighted as to give their true colors. Textiles: weaving—wool scarfs, baby blankets, luncheon sets; needlework—luncheon sets and tea cloths of simple design; block printed textiles, evening scarfs, table mats, bridge table covers, and many other articles.

Other crafts include leather, glass-ware, decorated work, enamel on copper or silver, furniture, and etchings.

Work offered for sale by the Society has passed a high test of craftsmanship, in the opinion of Humphrey J. Emery, director since 1930. In the first place, it has been chosen on a national basis, by a well-informed and critical jury, purely on its merits; second, it is regarded as saleable. The jury's selection frequently does not include work which the craftsman has found most saleable and he often expresses surprise at the choice. Quality, regardless of sales record, is the criterion.

Work also is generally sold anonymously, Mr. Emery pointed out. Everything is chosen by the customer on its own merits, usually without consideration of the craftsman's reputation. This is to encourage craftsmen not to depend

upon their reputations, rather on a succession of well-made articles.

Weavers have produced more varied and interesting textiles in the last few years than have been seen for a long time, according to Mr. Emery. The color which California and other Far Western weavers have been using has been a good influence for weavers everywhere and has encouraged experiment and departure from beaten paths. In New England, the many foreign weavers who have become established since the late thirties have exerted a definite influence upon native craftsmen, which has resulted in rather a new style—refreshing in its approach, and growing out of the combination of different and sometimes new materials. Each group is in fact influencing the other to their mutual advantage. Of course the production of fine handwoven textiles is governed by the availability of different materials and weavers are still struggling with shortages of various kinds, he said. However, there are some signs of a larger supply and weavers are becoming more aggressive in their search for threads and yarns.

Handwoven textiles at the Boston Society are selling better than they have in years, Mr. Emery stated. Part of this increased demand, as well as that for other crafts, is owing, he believes, to the Society's use of the most modern techniques of display, planned to utilize most effectively the space available. The walls of the Newbury Street salesroom are lined with handsome shelving, much of it glass, which shows the craftsman's work to advantage. Free forms for display are used in the center space. With the present arrangement the work of some 400 craftsmen can be shown effectively at one time. The window displays also are attracting much attention.

The craftsman exerts greater influence on the life of today than he has for many years, in Mr. Emery's opinion. In the present stage of mass production not only is the craftsman engaged in developing new ideas, but also in developing new uses for things. He can afford to experiment, as big industry cannot, and hence he often serves as a pilot in many fields of production.

One of the dangers he must guard against is the lack of fundamental

knowledge of his craft—knowledge lacking in many fields of present day education, but especially in craft training. There is no place for a superficial craftsman who has no knowledge of the past or who cannot learn from the past and make it part of his experiment.

Mrs. John S. Ames, the President since 1946, has fitted up a room for craft work where the guilds of the Society may have meetings or work sessions. This has been most helpful to all and is much appreciated.

Mrs. Orin Skinner, as chairman of the jury, is in a way taking Mr. Walker's place with the Jury. She is a very versatile person, has worked in many crafts herself and so has a real appreciation of craftsmen and their problems. It is a real privilege to be able to submit work to such a Jury, which is truly a friend of the craftsman and exists quite as much to help him improve his work as to judge articles to go into the salesroom. Every member, since the beginning of the Society, has had work before the Jury.

Just a word should be said of the many patrons of this Society and their appreciation of its work. Among the owners of flat silver from the Society's salesroom are Lily Pons and Claude Rains and Queen Marie of Romania had a valuable book bound by a Society craftsman.

One of the most recent commissions supervised by the Society was the silver desk ornament presented to Charles Francis Adams, named as the First Citizen of Boston at a dinner given in his honor in connection with the "Red Feather" campaign for the Community Chest organizations. The silver was the work of Stone Associates and the enamel decoration was done by Miss Mildred Watkins and Miss Florence Whitehead, while the inscription was engraved by John A. Gove. • • •

## TEXAS WEAVERS

The first state meeting of the Contemporary Hand Weavers of Texas was held in Houston during the week-end of May 13, with member interest high. Guest speaker of the Saturday afternoon session in the Warwick Hotel was Robert Pent, president of the Pioneer Worsted Company, New Braunfels, who talked on the history of wool and yarn.