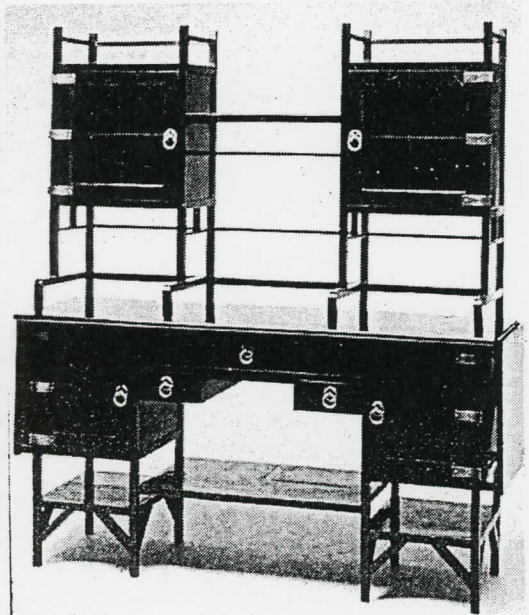


## DESIGN REVIEW

# All-Around Maverick Comes Back Into Focus



Bard Graduate Center

In the Japanese manner: "Sideboard" (circa 1877), one of the works in a show on Edward William Godwin, a polymath of the Aesthetic Movement, at the Bard Graduate Center.

By GRACE GLUECK

If not the most accomplished man in England of his time, Edward William Godwin (1833-1886) came close. An architect, antiquarian, designer of furniture and textiles, interior decorator, set and costume designer, journalist, critic, collector, bon vivant, high-caste Bohemian and womanizer, this dazzling polymath was also a close friend of Oscar Wilde, a collaborator with Whistler and the father — by the actress Ellen Terry — of Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966), the theatrical designer and theorist.

A major player in cultural circles during his lifetime, Godwin — identified with the art-for-art's-sake Aesthetic Movement — was quickly forgotten after his premature death, overshadowed by a new generation of tastemakers like the Arts and Crafts architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928) and a broad shift to more social concern in the arts. Although Godwin was remembered for a while in the worlds of architecture and theater, by the turn of the century his name — unlike that of his contemporary William Morris — had faded from the public mind. And Godwin's work, too, was in limbo, its identity shrouded, the records of it blurred.

Not until the late 1940's, with the publication of a biography that dealt with his range of achievements, did his rehabilitation begin. Still, his maverick ideas went largely ignored

beginning he saw himself as an "art-architect," that is, one concerned more with aesthetics than with the nuts and bolts of building. In 1861 he landed his first major nonchurch commission, winning a competition to design and build the Northampton town hall, one of the many such structures that were popping up all over England.

Done in the Gothic Revival style promoted by the influential critic John Ruskin, the hall (as seen in a drawing and a recent photograph) has a symmetrical main front with a central tower, and a facade whose boggle-the-eye busyness includes bands of stone in alternating colors, a sculpture program with eight large figures of kings and queens at first-floor level, a series of pointed-arch windows, a wide variety of capitals and carved reliefs of historical and local scenes. Regarded by Godwin as a "total design" success, it announced his coming of age as an architect. And shortly thereafter he began getting other big projects: more municipal buildings, castles, factories and villas.

But his most enduring work came almost two decades later. In the "last flowering" of his talent, Godwin produced domestic architecture in a very different mode from the theatricalism of his Gothic Revival work, including a series of houses and studios on Tite Street in the Chelsea section of London. The best of them were a house for Whistler and another for Frank Miles, a society portraitist close to Oscar Wilde,

until the early 60's, when a broader perspective developed on the modernist aesthetic, and he began to be re-evaluated as a highly individualistic contributor to it (later to post-modernism, too). The ambitious exhibition "E. W. Godwin: Aesthetic Movement Architect and Designer," at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, aims to set things right, establishing a firm place for him in the history of 19th-century architecture and design.

The crowded show, neatly shoe-horned into Bard's small galleries, is less engrossing than its solid catalog, a 431-page tome weighing about five pounds, with essays by nine authorities on the many aspects of Godwin's career. The show has a number of examples of his furniture, notably the Anglo-Japanese pieces that were his specialty; specimens of his wallpaper and textile designs; architectural plans and renderings along with photos of some of the buildings that still stand; and a section devoted to photographs and sketches for his theatrical ventures.

Although he set up an architectural practice in 1852 in his hometown, Bristol, and did many building commissions, Godwin's 20th-century reputation rests more on his furniture designs, says Susan Weber Soros, director of the Bard Graduate Center, who has written the catalog essay on that aspect of his work. An avid collector of Japanese art and artifacts from early in his career, Godwin used Japanese and other Asian motifs in many of his designs.

In the range of historicist styles that appealed to popular taste, from Gothic to Jacobean as well as the Anglo-Japanese style he is credited with inventing, he designed at least 400 pieces over a 25-year period, interpreting each style in his own fashion.

His most famous Anglo-Japanese piece was a skeletal sideboard of ebonized mahogany (produced by the furniture maker William Watt in many versions between 1867 and 1888), an austere structure consisting of a long table supported by two cabinets that balances on its top another two, all framed in an airy, gridlike system of skinny uprights and horizontals that suggest a Mondrian painting. The version shown here is happily accessorized with Godwin-designed pottery.

As an architect, Godwin started out (after a short apprenticeship to a city engineer in Bristol) restoring old churches and designing new ones in England and Ireland. From the

"E. W. Godwin: Aesthetic Movement Architect and Designer" is at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, 18 West 86th Street, Manhattan, (212) 501-3072, through Feb. 27.

done in a much simpler Queen Anne Revival style that stressed asymmetry and irregularity.

The original facade of the Whistler house was austere. Of white brick with woodwork painted a pale blue-gray of Whistler's choice, the house had a green-tiled mansard roof and plain sash windows that reflected the varying levels within. But the Metropolitan Board of Works from which the site was leased, entitling it to design control, rejected the original scheme as too plain, forcing Godwin to add various kinds of ornament.

The same thing happened with his striking plan for the three-story Miles house, cited by Godwin as "the best thing I ever did." The interlocking rectangles of balconies and windows on its facade are perfectly balanced, though placed asymmetricaly. The accepted design, shown here in a drawing by Godwin, is the result of two revisions, which removed stark features like corbels and carved-brick balconies and added shaped gables reminiscent of Dutch architecture before the board was satisfied.

Godwin's contributions to set and costume design are not the least important part of the show. Given to hanging out in theatrical garb, as seen in a wonderful photograph (circa 1861-65) of him wearing a medieval tunic, tights and hood, he created hundreds of costumes, properties and set designs for the theater. An enemy of anachronism, he paid strict attention to historical realism, acting as producer for many plays to control the fidelity of their production.

During his long relationship with Ellen Terry — whom he early on costumed as Titania in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" — Godwin drew on her practical experience to help him write a series of important articles on the architecture and costumes of Shakespeare's plays. His designs for Shakespearean creations, shown here among those for other plays, include costumes and musical instruments, taken from Venetian paintings, for an 1875 production of "The Merchant of Venice," costume designs for an 1880 staging of "Othello" (Godwin self-promotingly reviewed the play in the magazine *British Architect*) and a group of costume designs for "Hamlet," produced in 1884 at the Princess's Theater in London, for which Godwin did extensive research in Denmark.

Overall, the show succeeds in evoking a rounded picture of one of the 19th century's most far-ranging visual talents. But be warned: many of the flatworks (the plans, theater drawings, sketchbook pages and what have you) demand patient looking and an eye for detail. You get more of a feeling of Godwin's extravagant dimensions from the catalog, which wags this scholarly exhibition rather than the other way around.