Uniting the Wild and the Rigid

By BRICE BROWN

As a general rule, artistic movements are either born of a need to react against a preceding trend — such as Neoclassicism's attack on Rococo — or are the result of exposure to new visual ideas learned from previously unconsidered cultures — Picasso's sublimation of African sculpture into Cubism, for example. The Aesthetic Movement, which took root in England in the 1850s and was later introduced to America in 1876, combined both this reactionary impulse and this hybridization of exotic influences.

A BRASS MENAGERIE

The Bard Graduate Center

Parker table (c. 1880-85).

BARD GRADUATE CENTER

The movement's resulting objects are intricately worked, often tantalizingly bizarre pastiches of Eastern motifs with flat, angular, easily mass-produced forms. And the two floors of more than 75 examples — including tables, chairs, chandeliers, and andirons, as well as a large selection of door hardware — on display in "A Brass Menagerie" at the Bard Graduate Center demonstrate why brass was an ideal medium through which to express the Aesthetic Movement's unique stylistic amalgam.

Responding to the increasingly poor design of industrialized goods, Aesthetic designers and manufacturers aimed to reintroduce higher levels of artistry into mass-produced wares, marking the beginning of the now ubiquitous concept of affordable design. Coinciding with this desire was an intense interest in the refined artifacts being exported from Japan, which flooded the west with new design ideas. Cues were also taken from Gothic, Moorish, and Persian influences, adding to the overall riot of patterns and forms contained in each piece. Brass's inherent malleability, coupled with advances in machine-making technology, meant designs could be easily and inexpensively stamped on a surface or die-cut from sheets, allowing various parts to be interchangeable. This not only facilitated the uniquely flat, repetitive, tooled look of Aesthetic brass, but it also guaranteed the objects were accessible to a broader clientele.

At first glance, the seeming relentlessness of all-over decoration that virtually engulfs these Aesthetic brass objects comes across as a fussy lack of decision-making. Extended examination, however, shows sophisticated restraint and highly controlled relationships between pattern and form. Symmetry is paramount, disallowing motifs to become chaotic. Brass's mellow coloration also helps unify potentially disjunctive mark-making, and simultaneously lends a sense of gilded splendor.

The tension caused by trying to reconcile nature's wild unpredictability with rigid industrialized form is palpably evident in a side table (ca. 1880-85) produced by the American firm of Bradley and Hubbard Manufacturing Company. Strong geometric lines attempt to corral floral motifs, arabesques, and an array of minute decoration, while the eye is taken on an endless top-to-bottom-to-top journey. Four L-shaped legs resembling a spaceship's landing gear project strongly upward, only to droop unexpectedly at the top into beautiful, but generically rendered, blossoming flowers. They appear like four tiny heads bowing in anticipation of — or perhaps in reverence to — the scallop-edged top hovering just above them. Surface decoration is compartmentalized, similar in feeling to an amassing of glyph-filled cartouches. Adding a shock of unexpected color are a blue ceramic tile, inlaid in the top, and a blue ceramic cylinder, mounted to the base, both manufactured by the Longwy Faience Company, France.

While the Bradley and Hubbard table is more typical of the work on view, there are a few truly unique pieces here, each embodying emotional, even narrative, qualities. An 1886 floor lamp by P.E. Guerin takes shape as one extended leg of a bird, topped with a bird's chest and head, which in turn are topped with two knobby and colorful blown glass gas fixtures; the whole thing rests on one oversize talon. With surprisingly elegant, elongated lines, this lamp is more exotic sculpture than functional object — the accurately rendered feathers and finely chased claws attest to the maker's sculptural proclivities — and is at once frightening and engaging.

Likewise, a candelabrum (c. 1880-90) by an unknown maker displays obvious Middle Eastern influences, appearing similar in form to a genie's bottle. Its three candleholders seem almost infested with decorative brass drops; the faces of the central body, which resemble an abstracted flower head, are each mounted with a very large faceted glass ball. The work as a whole feels plagued by its decoration and perfectly encapsulates the metaphor of nature's potential to go awry.

Until October 14 (18 W. 86th St., between Columbus Avenue and Central Park West, 212-501-3000).