

Educating American Designers for Industry, 1853-1903

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MANY DISCUSSIONS of Postmodernism claim a radical historical break occurred after World War II when a new consumer society emerged defined by swings in fashion and styling, planned obsolescence, the pervasive use of advertising, and new national and international networks of distribution. Art historians who trace the prehistory of such a Postmodern society most often look to the theoretical work of the Frankfurt School. However, a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship is documenting late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century examples of a familiar consumer society, focusing in particular on the complex nature of art production after the Industrial Revolution.¹ This paper examines the early history of

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1. Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers* (New York: Dover Books, 1949); Neil McKendrick, 'Josiah Wedgwood: an Eighteenth Century Entrepreneur in Salesmanship and Marketing Techniques,' *Economic History Review* (2nd series, 12.3) 1960: 408-33; Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (London, 1979); Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1987); Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1987); Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Martyn Lee, *Consumer Culture Reborn* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

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design education in the United States as a tool for articulating how thoroughly the industrial revolution, and the expanding markets its success depended upon, transformed the dialectic between fine art and consumer culture. One might say, how thoroughly the art of commerce transformed the commerce of art. The origins of this transformation are in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and not in the decades after 1945.

The design school is a key site from which to study this transformation. It is a new institution of the nineteenth century. Unlike the much older Academies of Art which Nikolaus Pevsner has documented,² the design school's reason for being was to fill the needs of the new industrial manufacturing class. However, this basic goal became imbedded in the complex cultural agenda of providing an art museum for the good of the people, to educate taste. The typical history of the nineteenth-century museum focuses on the museum's new civic role in the city and the contribution of wealthy, often female, philanthropists.³ Counterbalancing this view, it will be argued here that the primary need to train designers for industry was the engine carrying the art museum in its train—and not the other way around.

It is important to remember that the designer is not a new kind of laborer in the nineteenth century. A designer is someone who creates models or working prototypes for serial reproduction. The designer as a type of laborer predates the industrial revolution for the simple reason that the division of labor to mass produce products preceded mechanization. There is nothing *intrinsically* modern about separating the process of design and/or model-making from the process of fabrication.⁴ For example, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the French court created such a demand for luxury goods that a manufacture

2. Nikolaus Pevsner, *Academies of Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940).

3. See, for example, Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

4. Edward Lucie-Smith, *A History of Industrial Design* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1985). This is one of the best overviews of serial production before mechanization.

was established where urban artisans worked from designs provided by famous painters; the process of making was divided into component tasks which were then duplicated by hand.⁵ This is not that dissimilar from the method of production of ancient Greek pottery.⁶

However, until the eighteenth century the scale of most industries seldom required more than one craftsman to be responsible for every stage of production. For example, it is not until 1750 that the division of labor in the British pottery industry was extensive enough that we find workers specifically described as modelers.⁷ The organization of labor in the British calico printing industry (pattern drawer, block cutter/engraver, printer) did not change from the late 1600s until the introduction of water-powered roller printing machines in 1796, when the engraver and printer were rendered redundant while opportunities for pattern drawers increased.⁸ The industrial designer is unique *only* in creating working prototypes for serial reproduction *by machines*. But within the context of machine production, in many industries beginning in the 1830s, the industrial designer became more valuable to the manufacturer. As Adrian Forty has put it, 'the successful design . . . released the machine's capacity to make a profit.'⁹

5. This history is noted even in the founding document of the Rhode Island Art Association, *Circular and Constitution* (Providence: 1853), 10-11. See note 18 below. It would appear that there is an ongoing history of art that incorporates the realities of mass or workshop production, but this sort of history is not tolerated by historians who emphasize the self-generated achievement of individual genius.

6. R. M. Cook, *Greek Painted Pottery* (London: Methuen & Co., 1972), 270-74.

7. Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1986), 34. Forty reports that in 1769 a modeler was paid twice the wage of a skilled craftsman. Forty (p. 44) quotes Marx arguing that mechanical production only completes what the division of labor began, that is, the source of alienation begins with the division of labor and not mechanization per se. See also Dietrich Rueschemeyer, *Power and the Division of Labor* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986).

8. Forty, 44-51.

9. *Ibid.*, 58. This process has accelerated today with the advent of computer-aided, rather than mechanical, tooling. For example, the clothing company, Benetton, maintains no inventory but, via computer, tracks changing taste and can redesign its merchandise and distribute it worldwide in seventeen-day cycles. See Stephen Bayley, *Commerce and Culture* (London: Design Museum, n.d.), 113-15.

As more industries were mechanized in the 1830s, the industrial designer took on an ever more important role mediating between the manufacturers' striving for profit-making designs and the growing numbers of consumers desiring differentiated products. The industrial designer's function was to create design differentiation for a class society where exercising taste was one of the most important modern vehicles for the social construction of identity. The design school can be seen as a contested cultural site for the representation of cultural capital after industrialization introduced mass consumption on an unprecedented scale. Historians and critics on the left and the right have been strangely unwilling to consider consumer products in terms other than the negative one of commodification or with moralizing cries for a lost pre-industrial past. Usually these campaigns have gone on under the guise of advocating 'real needs' or 'good taste.' These lacunae will not be addressed until more cultural historians confront the issue of education, the commerce of art, and mass consumption.¹⁰

Although the design school was new, it carried with it a residue of the artisan tradition. Industrialization proceeded slowly and continued to incorporate older forms of production. Throughout the nineteenth century many mechanized consumer product factories continued to include hand-based, artisanal labor. The designer and model-maker was the aristocrat of these artisans, but all skilled laborers were a class above the new factory proletariat. The design school's clientele was the factory-based, skilled artisan (fig. 1).

In the United States, a national discussion on the importance of training American designers for industry began in the 1850s and culminated during the period from 1867 to 1887 with the ambitious establishment of design schools in manufacturing cities across the country. Based on British, French, and German

10. The absence of industrial design history from practically all American universities (including those with politically-engaged cultural studies programs) represents a failure to address one of the quintessentially modern cultural practices.



Fig. 1. A Gorham artisan etching silver, c. 1892. The worker shown here is carefully painting a nonconductive resist varnish over a perviously drawn pattern or scene. After this, the piece would be dipped into an acid bath to corrode away the unvarnished surface leaving the varnished design in relief. The protective varnish would then be removed, and the pattern would stand out in relief. This process might be repeated three to four times to achieve a pattern of varying depth. Women with drawing and painting skills were considered most likely to succeed at this task. *Women's Work at the Gorham Manufacturing Company*, 1892. Brown University Library.

precedents, these new American design schools resulted from the intersecting interests of businessmen, manufacturers, artists, wealthy female patrons of the arts, and educators who have left us a largely-untapped literature elaborating a belief in the uniquely modern possibilities of artistic design for industry, and the necessity of educating (equally) men and women for this new practice.

The Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) can serve as an exemplary case study of an evolving design school during this pivotal period. A Rhode Island design school was first proposed

in December 1853 by a consortium of Rhode Island manufacturers whose objective was to overcome foreign competition by establishing a local source of designers. Their two-pronged approach was to train designers for local industry and, as an integral part of this process, to establish an art gallery or museum as a repository of correct artistic or symbolic capital. That is, the design school's mission was not only to transmit skills in a vocational setting, but also to display and legitimate what Pierre Bourdieu has called cultural capital—the taste of one economic class.¹¹

The manufacturers' efforts were hindered by the Civil War. RISD was incorporated in 1877; classes were first held the next year. The first objective of the school was: 'The instruction of artisans in drawing, painting, modeling, and designing, that they may successfully apply the principles of Art to the requirements of trade and manufacture.'¹²

In one sense, the mission of the entire school was to train designers for industry. But the second companion mission was to establish an art collection to wrap around this other goal (fig. 2). In practice, a thriving fine-art curriculum came to coexist with that devoted to applied and mechanical arts. The early treasurer, William Weeden, thought of it this way:

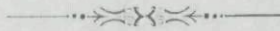
The day pupils are generally in independent circumstances, and are being educated for artists, amateurs, and buyers of works of art, and elegant objects. We need a higher standard at large in the community, in order that true design may be appreciated. . . . The evening pupils are chiefly sons of mechanics and working men. . . . These pupils will naturally become workers in design applied to arts and manufactures.¹³

11. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction,' in *Power and Ideology in Education* (New York, 1977), 487–510; and Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

12. *Circular of the Rhode Island School of Design* (Providence: J. A. & R. A. Reid, 1878), 5. The three-point statement of mission has been reprinted each year to the present, and is one of the two commonly-used references for explaining RISD's origins.

13. Elsie S. Bronson, 'The Rhode Island School of Design; a Half-Century Record 1878–1928' [typewritten manuscript]; Archives, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, 13. Elsie Bronson presented her completed manuscript to the London pub-

Rhode Island School of Design



The objects of this school are :—

FIRST. The instruction of artisans in drawing, painting, modelling, and designing, that they may successfully apply the principles of Art to the requirements of trade and manufacture.

SECOND. The systematic training of students in the practice of Art, in order that they may understand its principles, give instruction to others, or become artists.

THIRD. The general advancement of public Art Education, by the exhibition of works of Art and of Art school studies, and by lectures on Art.

Fig. 2. The Rhode Island School of Design's founding mission statement. *Circular of the Rhode Island School of Design, 1878-79, 5.* RISD Archives.



Fig. 3. Mary F. Richards, "A Corner of the Lecture Room," *Circular of the Rhode Island School of Design, 1891-92*, 5 RISD Archives.

Or, as the first school headmaster stated in a letter:

We have now considered the school chiefly in a practical and technical sense, that is, in the relation which it bears to the great needs of a manufacturing community; but it is to be hoped that it will be successful also in interesting ladies and gentlemen of taste and leisure in art studies; for their attendance will increase its power and broaden its influence in another very important direction. I hardly need to urge the claims of art as a delightful occupation for leisure hours.¹⁴

The student body at RISD as a whole was a microcosm of the social relations of late nineteenth-century Providence.

Until World War I, it was ambiguous whether consumer product design was the dog wagging the tail of the fine arts, or if it was the other way around (figs. 3, 4, and 5). This was resolved by the late 1920s as RISD prepared to become a nationally

lishing firm of Brown, Shipley & Co. in August 1932, but then history has never been published. The Bronson manuscript remains the only detailed history of the institution.

14. *Ibid.*, 11.

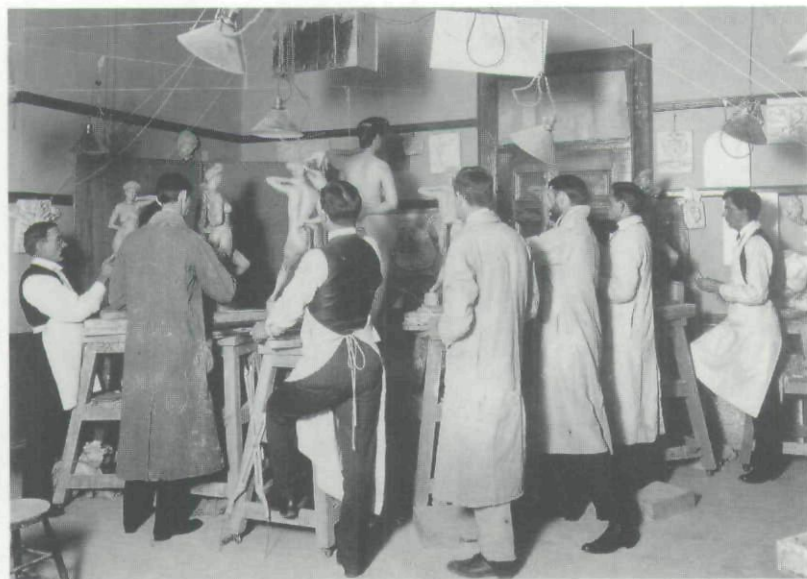


Fig. 4. Male students drawing the female nude, c. 1900. RISD Archives.

accredited, degree-granting institution of higher education. A RISD brochure announced: 'The School of Design is not, it must be understood, a trade school.'¹⁵

The impetus for a Rhode Island design school lay in its status as an important nineteenth-century industrial center. Indeed, Pawtucket, Rhode Island proclaims itself to be the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution because of the successful cotton mill Samuel Slater ran there on the banks of the Blackstone River beginning in the 1790s. Slater's water-powered

15. RISD brochure, 'Mechanical Design Department' (Providence, n.d. [1928]). This transformation was noted by former RISD President John R. Frazier (1955–1962) in his internal report from the mid-1950s entitled, 'An Inquiry Into Causes that Brought About Changes in Curricula and Educational Standards in Rhode Island School of Design.' The concluding remarks were: 'It seems certain that the intent of the founders relative to the training of artisans as outlined in the first purpose of the charter has been completely disregarded in the drive to bring the Day School to college level. It is equally certain that if the founders had desired to establish a technical school at college level this intention would have been clearly stated. On the other hand, times change, and institutions with them. Charters, like constitution, have to be interpreted in the light of clear and present conditions.'

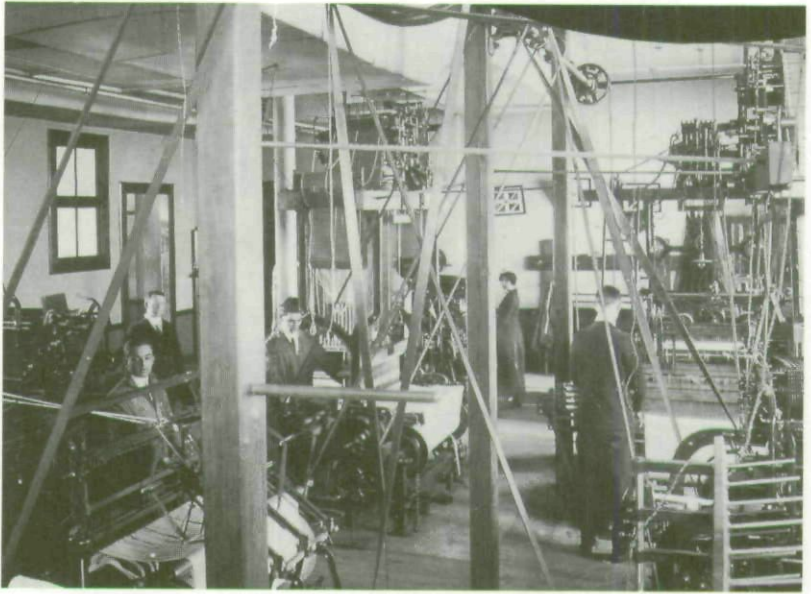


Fig. 5. Textile studio, c. 1913. RISD Archives.

mill spawned other local textile and companion tool-making factories. By the 1820s and 1830s the factory system had become firmly established in Rhode Island with major industries of metal trades, tooling, rubber, textiles, jewelry, and silversmithing. One of these early silversmithing firms was located in Providence and had been founded by Jabez Gorham, whose son John Gorham entered the firm in 1841, forming J. Gorham & Son.¹⁶ In the 1850s and 1860s John Gorham transformed the small, fourteen-employee company into the world's largest manufacturer of silverwares. In 1878—the year RISD opened—the British Parliament noted that a Providence company had now outproduced the total annual British production of fine silverwares.¹⁷

But from the vantage point of 1850 the two problems facing a

16. Charles H. Carpenter, Jr., *Gorham Silver, 1831–1981* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1982), 28–32; 40–41.

17. This also was the year John Gorham was ousted from the company due to his personal bankruptcy; see Carpenter, 91–93.



Fig. 6. The Gorham factory buildings at Canal and Steeple Streets, Providence, R.I. before 1890. The First Baptist Church is at left.

manufacturer like John Gorham were technology and a limited product line. Gorham wanted to introduce mass production machinery into the production of flatware, to utilize lathe-production for hollow ware, and at the same time to offer more products ornamented in more styles. In 1852 John Gorham went to London, Birmingham, Manchester, and Sheffield to study British production and design methods. Gorham's diaries are at the John Hay Library and record his search. He spent his days apprenticing in factories anywhere he could get in, learning production methods, interviewing designers and artisans. Gorham returned to Providence with a basic design library and study collection, the first American steam-powered drop press for the manufacture of flatware, and the detailed information gleaned from the factory artisans about the British design schools that were in the founding circular of the Rhode Island Art Association one year later (fig. 6).

The Rhode Island Art Association was born out of the need of Rhode Island manufacturers to produce local designers for their factories. As stated in the thirty-page circular written December 1853:

The manufacturer is now discovering that the best price, the most certain market, the greatest demand for each and all of the fabrics he is producing; are in some strange way connected with the highest taste shown in their design, the greatest harmony in their proportions, or the greatest beauty in their embellishments. It is not enough that his article is as good as or as useful as his rival's: if it is more beautiful it secures the prize, if it is less it is driven from the field. . . .

The history of manufacturing advance in all countries demonstrates . . . the advantage be found on the side of that where elements of beauty in design, or elegance in decoration, enter most largely. Nor only where material and workmanship are equal is this true, but even where advantage in these points lies with the less elegant and ornamental product. . . .

[Now] the designs come to us by steamer in a few days after their production, and are immediately copied here; and thus our own goods are in the market before the foreign consignments can reach us through the slower sailing vessel—so that it will be time enough to produce our own designs, when this cheap piracy becomes no longer possible. . . .

The only way to avoid dependence upon others for many articles that we know how to make ourselves, is not be dependent upon them for our ideas of beauty, and for that subtle regulator of trade—our popular taste. The only way to possess these in any degree, is to cultivate them through all the means and appliances in our power; and one of the best of these means, has been shown by the experience of those nations most largely interested; to be the establishment of a good School of Design, with a subsidiary Gallery of Art. . . .

It is a scheme that does not confine its benefits to one or two chosen classes in the community, but it reaches throughout the whole. The report of the Sheffield School, for 1849, shows that its pupils came from every walk, and what is of more consequence, that many of them returned again to the employment in which they were originally engaged. . . .

Nor are *men* alone interested in its plan.—There is a large and fast increasing number of *women*. . . .

We would say but a few words in conclusion. The Society presents itself to the public as a willing agent in a great public movement. It relies upon the past history of manufactures, when contrasted with the present, to prove the remarkably successful results of a cultivation of Art but very recently undertaken with reference to their improvement. It accepts as its field the two departments that have been found so well adapted to this end: an Art Museum and a School of Design mutually connected. It believes that the advantages they offer are especially valuable to a people like our own, and are applicable to both sexes, and to almost every age, and occupation; and grounds its hope of success on the intelligent conviction of every reader, that *as Art advances, manufactures and commerce advance with it.*¹⁸

Almost 150 manufacturers, merchants, lawyers, academics, clergy, and other men signed the circular establishing the Rhode Island Art Association. The treasurer was John Gorham. It seems likely that Gorham, as the first to introduce steam power into a city factory, the first to sublet power to other manufacturers, the first with the drop press, and the first to compile a major design library, was a major force behind this document with its articulation of a design school and companion museum.¹⁹

The Rhode Island Art Association was incorporated in May 1854. In January 1858 the Association submitted a formal proposal for the establishment of a Rhode Island School of Design. The document's authors asserted that the goal of such a school was 'the supply, to the manufacturer, of a kind of labor essential to his success, and hitherto but scantily furnished. . . . He will be enabled to make goods, which, with his present system of dependence on imported models and designs, he cannot now manufacture. He will soon begin to originate patterns, and can enter

18. *Circular and Constitution of the Rhode-Island Art Association* (Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co., 1854), 6-7; 16-18, 22-23. A copy of this document is at the Rhode Island Historical Society Library. The meeting was announced in the *Journal* December 7, 1853, page 2, and reported on December 13, 1853, page 2. The meeting was held in Franklin Hall, Market Square.

19. *American Sterling Silver Ware: A Sketch of the Gorham Manufacturing Co.* (Providence, n.d. [1876]), 5. Rider Collection, John Hay Library, Brown University. At this time, the Gorham plant extended between North Main and Canal Streets, and Steeple and Friend Streets.

more successfully into competition with the foreign producer.²⁰ They noted that free or almost free schools of design already had been opened in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore with good results. For example, in Philadelphia, the best patterns for house papers now were produced locally by designers who were graduates of the program.

After the Civil War, design education became the battle cry of manufacturing centers nationwide. In 1870 Massachusetts—on the petition of merchants and manufacturers—passed a law requiring every city with more than 10,000 people to provide day and evening classes in industrial and mechanical drawing for people over the age of fifteen.²¹ In the decade around the 1870s eleven American design schools, including RISD, opened their doors.

George Ward Nichols summarized this sentiment in his 1877 book, *Art Education Applied to Industry*:

The broad meaning of the term 'art education' has not always been understood. It is most often used in its relation to the fine arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture, as if these higher arts and the industries were not mutually dependent, or as if the boundary which is supposed to separate them were not, . . . constantly invaded. . . . But the term 'art education' is used here in the largest sense. It means artistic and scientific instruction applied to common trades and occupations, as well as to the fine arts. It means the educated sense of the beautiful is not the special property of one class but that it may be possessed and enjoyed by all.²²

Nonetheless, basic divisions in the curriculum track at RISD were class-based. The bifurcation within the freehand division between painters and designers signified a class difference between the wealthy, often female, amateur/collector and the working artisan.

20. *School of Design Proposed to be Established by the Rhode Island Art Association* (Providence, n.d. [1858]), 2-3. [Petition to the General Assembly, 1858.]

21. Walter Smith, the key advocate in Massachusetts, wrote: 'Among all the educational movements which have arisen in this country during the 1870s, none has seemed so completely in harmony with the spirit of the times as education in the elements of industrial arts.' Walter Smith, *The Masterpieces of the Centennial International Exhibition* (Philadelphia: Gebbie & Barrie, n.d. [1876]), 11: 497.

22. George Ward Nichols, *Art Education Applied to Industry* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1877), 4.

But there also was a hierarchy within the design curriculum. For example, *industrial* design meant something specific. Courses in industrial design at RISD were part of a freehand drawing curriculum that featured sequential specialization leading to a concentration in either 'flat' or 'round' design; machine design was part of a separate curriculum based on mechanical drawing. That is, industrial design was identified from the beginning with the primary production of commodities and not with the design of the machines that facilitated production (fig. 7).²³

It is usual to begin the history of RISD with its incorporation on April 5, 1877, through the efforts of the ladies of the Rhode Island Centennial Committee, who returned from the 1876 Centennial exhibition with a surplus of \$1,675 which they used to found a school of design.²⁴ It is tempting to see this construction of origin as part of the process by which the primary goal of educating designers for industry became feminized and clothed in the more socially-accepted and gentle pursuit of a disinterested aesthetic education with a museum as the primary institution and the training of artisans as a secondary adjunct.

This was probably not the intention of the most important of these Centennial Committee women, Mrs. Jesse Metcalf, who actively managed the daily operation of the school for nearly two decades until her death in 1895 (fig. 8).

During her tenure, Mrs. Jesse Metcalf actively recruited reproductions of 'great art' in the form of casts and photographs, as well as industrial and mechanical models. These would form the core of a 'well chosen industrial museum.'²⁵ In 1885 RISD

23. What became an independent degree in Industrial Design in the 1940s developed out of this freehand, rather than the mechanical, drawing curriculum.

24. *An Address Commemorative of Jesse Metcalf and Helen Adelia Rowe Metcalf* (Providence: Snow & Farnham, 1901); Bronson, 5-6; McCarthy, 64-65. McCarthy writes: 'Another institution in which women figured prominently, the Rhode Island School of Design Education (RISDE) [sic], became one of the country's major educational institutions in the fine arts. . . . Like many of its sister chapters, the Rhode Island group exceeded its fund-raising quotas for the fair, leaving a tidy nest egg of \$1,675, which was promptly invested in a new art school. . . . While Metcalf took care of the daily administrative chores, her husband assumed the financial burdens.'

25. *RISD Yearbook* (Providence: J. A. & R. A. Reid, 1888), 20.

FREE HAND DEPARTMENT.

Painters, Engravers, Jewelers, Chasers, Silversmiths,
Designers, Wood Carvers, Etc.

FIRST YEAR.	FIRST TERM.	Drawing from Geometrical Solids. Historic Ornament (cast). Perspective.	
	SECOND TERM.	PAINTERS.	DESIGNERS.
		Ornament, Light and Shade. Perspective. Harmony of Color.	Elements of Growth in Design. Plant Analysis. Style and History of Ornament. Ornament, Light and Shade.
SECOND YEAR.	FIRST TERM.	Still Life, Black and White. Detail Antique Figure. Antique Figure. Perspective Shadows. Still Life—Color. Architectural Orders.	DESIGNERS IN THE FLAT.
	SECOND TERM.	Antique Figure. Anatomical Rendering of same. Human Head from Life. Human Figure from Life, Pen and Ink for Processes of Reproduction.	DESIGNERS IN RELIEF.
			Historical Orna- ment. Architectural Or- ders. Detail Ornament from the Antique. Harmony of Colors.
			Historical Orna- ment. Architectural Or- ders. Detail Ornament from the Antique. Detail Figure from the Antique.

Composition, including Costume and History of Ornament, continued
through the Second and Third Years.

THIRD YEAR.

COURSES IN DRAWING, PAINTING, MODELING, WOOD CARVING AND DESIGN.

Fig. 7. The designer's education was conceived as part of the Freehand Department which had a course of study distinct from the Mechanical Department *Circular of the Rhode Island School of Design, 1878-79, 5.* RISD Archives.

MECHANICAL DEPARTMENT.

Draughtsmen, Pattern Makers, Carpenters,
Machinists, Etc., Etc.

FIRST YEAR.

FIRST TERM.

Free Hand Drawing from Geometric Solids.
Graphical Geometrical Problems.
Orthographic Projections from Models, Patterns and Machine
Parts.

SECOND TERM.

Intersection and Development.
Use of Color and Brush.
Isometric Projection.
Working Drawings.

SECOND YEAR.

FIRST TERM.

CARPENTERS AND BUILDERS.

Architectural Details.
Plans and Elevations.
The Orders.
Perspective.

MACHINISTS & PATTERN MAKERS.

Study of and Drawing from Successful Machines.
Reduction of Free-hand Sketches to Working Drawings.

SECOND TERM.

Framing Plans.
Building Construction.
Strains and Weights.
Roof and Floor Trussing.

Study of Assembled and Detailed Drawing.
Study of Mechanical Movements.
Designs of Cams, Gearing, etc.
Elements of Machine Designs.

THIRD YEAR.

SPECIAL COURSES . . . MATHEMATICS, MECHANICS AND DESIGN.

considered itself lucky to obtain 'charts, models, and casts of ornaments similar to those used in the Prussian Art Industrial schools.' After Mrs. Metcalf's death, her husband—a prominent Rhode Island woolen manufacturer—funded an addition to the school to house gallery space. For another decade the gallery exhibitions ran the gamut from the nude figure, to work in metal, relief modeling, architectural drafting, book illustration, to the ever-popular machine design (fig. 9).

It should be borne in mind that in 1891, when a benefactor named Albert Jones left \$25,000 for the purpose of founding an art museum in the city of Providence, RISD's ability to claim the bequest was contested because its purpose was to train artisans.²⁶ RISD's lawyer countered that it had already established a museum as part of its course of instruction, and that there was really nothing to *prohibit* considering a school of design to be the same as an art institute.

Helen Adelia Rowe Metcalf's role in getting RISD off the ground was pivotal. (Her descendents have continued their financial support to this day.) What this matriarchal lineage has obscured is the fundamental economic incentive of manufacturers like John Gorham and the other members of the Rhode Island Art Association in setting the wheels in motion. What the manufacturers needed was the designer who could release 'the machine's capacity to make a profit' in the new era of a consumer society. With industrialization, the designer becomes a key social actor whose history has been almost constantly obscured by the attention paid his more famous counterpart—the progressive artist. America may have industrialized early, but studying the cultural implications of mass production is still virgin territory.

In the dialectic between the production of fine arts and design-driven consumer goods, design education had as much to

26. Newspaper clipping dated October 1891, Archives, Rhode Island School of Design. The 1895 *RISD Yearbook* announced receipt of the bequest 'by decree of court.'



Fig. 8. Frank W. Benson, Portrait of Mrs. Jesse Metcalf. Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, gift of Mr. William C. Baker, Mrs. Manton Metcalf, Mrs. Stephen O. Metcalf, and Mrs. Gustav Radeke.

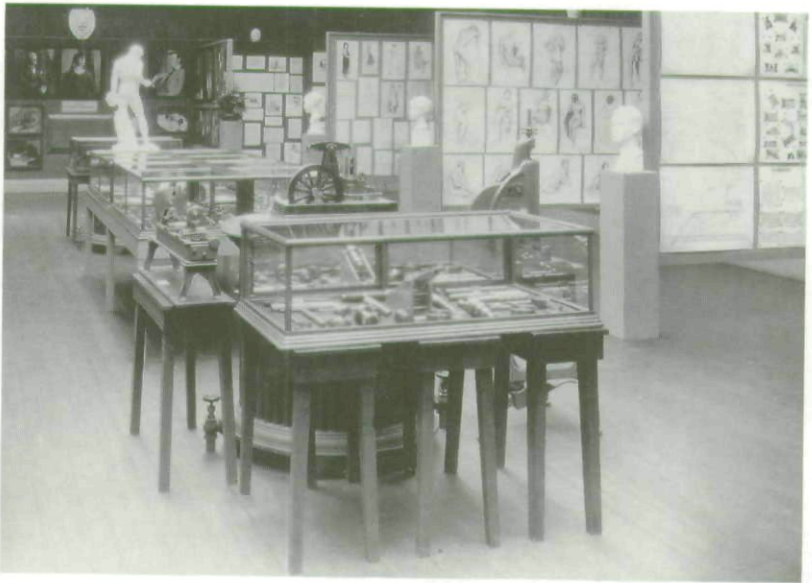


Fig. 9. The Waterman Galleries, Rhode Island School of Design, opened 1897. Early exhibitions indiscriminately combined the display of machine designs, figurative sculpture, paintings, and studies for jewelry and other decorative arts. RISD Archives.

do with reasserting a standard of taste based on the fine arts as it had to do with the skill-based needs confronting manufacturers. In the late twentieth century, as we continue to adjust to the experience of industrialization and the growth of consumption on an ever more enormous scale, it is as important as ever to explore the dialectic between fine art and mass consumption, and to be alive to how we use the power of our knowledge of art to educate. In the modern period, the prestige of fine art must be read within the context of mass consumer culture.

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