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Nell Brooker Mayhew and the Arts and Crafts Movement in America

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Introduction: Influences and Style

Nell Brooker Mayhew (1876–1940), a pioneering American artist born and educated in Illinois and known primarily as a printmaker and painter, contributed remarkably to the realm of architecture and interior design during the first half of the twentieth century. She was active at the height of the Arts and Crafts movement, and its ideals were vividly manifested in her work. Collaboration with her sister Adelaide, an interior designer, presented Nell with the opportunity to effectively succeed as a design professional, and her studies and etchings of the surviving Spanish missions of Southern California, thoroughly regarded by proponents of the Arts and Crafts movement, graciously entwined the pursuit to document and preserve these vanishing monuments of America's Spanish heritage. The etchings also undoubtedly helped popularize the Spanish Mission style, one of many unique architectural styles vibrantly promoted by the trend.

The Arts and Crafts movement originated in England in the latter half of the nineteenth century with British reformer and designer William Morris (1834–1896), who was a disciple of art critic John Ruskin (1819–1900), renowned for his philanthropy and writings on social reform.¹ The movement, which grew from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, was a reaction against the perceived negative impacts of mechanization and mass production of the Industrial Revolution on society.² Emphasizing nature and simplicity, medieval guilds were promoted as models for the artistic creation of affordable, everyday, handmade crafts. These ideals eventually spread from England to Europe and America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In America, Gustav Stickley, founder of the Craftsman Workshops, closely followed Morris's model. Stickley's publication The Craftsman and other contemporary journals illustrated design principles of the middle-class home, emphasizing organic ideas and the importance of the natural, harmonizing approach to the building environment. The Arts and Crafts movement inevitably came to an end in the 1920s when modern tenets of the Machine Age and the pursuit of national identity following World War I brought to a close the desire for handcrafted goods in America, which ultimately became too expensive for all but the wealthy to afford.

Art historian Alissa Anderson, author of Nell's biography, argued that the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement, and the related Aesthetic movement, can be seen in the idea of nature in her work and the quality of craftsmanship in her paintings and etchings.³ Anderson also implied that Mayhew's work was reminiscent of the Japonisme style, which was popular at the time (referring to a taste for Japanese culture), and emphasized nature, simplicity, and spirituality.⁴
Early Life and Inspiration

Nell Cole Danely was born in 1875 in Astoria, Illinois, the youngest of five children of the Reverend Alfred Marion and Ella Danely. The Danely family arrived in Urbana in 1900.

Young Nell Danely exhibited artistic talents during her childhood: in 1892 at the age of sixteen, her watercolor *Yacht* was displayed at the Art Institute of Chicago. She attended the Illinois Woman’s College in Jacksonville and Northwestern University in Evanston, IL, where she received a bachelor of science degree in 1897.5 She was enrolled in postgraduate work at Chicago University (now The University of Chicago), and between 1901 and 1906, she attended the University of Illinois and studied under Newton Alonzo Wells, an American painter, sculptor, and architect educated in Paris.6 Under Wells’s guidance, Nell began pioneering her trademark color etching process. In 1904, she enrolled in a sketching course under the instruction of John Vanderpoel, conducted by the Art Institute of Chicago, which held classes in a popular artist’s colony in Delevan, Wisconsin.7 In 1905, she continued studies at the Art Institute under Danish impressionist John Johansen, and her etchings *Autumn Gold* and *Sunset* were exhibited there in 1906 and 1907, respectively.8

In 1905 and 1906, Nell accompanied her father to Saugatuck, Michigan, a popular recreational destination for artists during the early twentieth century.9 It is likely this location, with its numerous sand dunes, inspired Nell’s etchings *Morning on the Kalamazoo River* and *Sand Dunes*, awarded with medals at the Alaska-Yukon Exposition in 1909.

When the family arrived in Champaign County in 1900, Nell’s Urbana experiences would have a great impact on her subsequent development as an artist as well as on her contributions to architecture of the early twentieth century. Indeed, three powerful inspirations can be traced to Urbana:

![Figure 3.1 Nell Brooker Mayhew. Photograph, c. 1925. Source: Linda Slaughter.](image-url)
University of Illinois instructor Newton Alonzo Wells; her father, Reverend Alfred Danely; and her brother-in-law, Urbana’s prolific architect Joseph William Royer.

Newton Alonzo Wells graduated from Syracuse University in 1877 with a degree in painting and studied at the Paris Académie Julian. In 1899, Wells joined the University of Illinois as professor of the history and practice of painting. During his time in Paris, he was exposed to the monotypes of Edgar Degas. Wells brought these practices back to the University of Illinois, undoubtedly influencing his students, including young Nell. It was there that she began to develop her unique singular color etching process for which she is best known and recognized as an artist.

In addition, Wells was an accomplished muralist with works at the university and throughout Illinois. Anderson maintained that Nell learned mural painting from John Vanderpoel, yet I argue that she was also undoubtedly influenced by Wells. Wells published detailed articles on his pioneering mural painting techniques, and Nell likely learned more about the technical aspects of the art form from him, whereas otherwise both artists differed greatly, stylistically and thematically. Wells’s paintings and murals typically depicted realistic, almost photographic scenes, many with themes inspired by classical antiquity, history, or university events, while his paintings often presented detailed portraits and images of flowers and fruit. Nell, on the other hand, produced impressionistic works typically with imprecise lines and muted colors, incorporating aspects of styles such as Symbolism and Expressionism, more reminiscent of Vanderpoel’s works. Unlike Wells, Nell produced few portraits or images of people, preferring instead to depict nature in her works. Still, Wells’s influence undoubtedly contributed to Nell’s mastery of the complex art of mural painting, greatly empowering interior spaces of the built environment.

The Reverend Alfred Danely was well known in Urbana; his love of nature, and trees in particular, was emphasized in the Urbana Daily Courier:

>a lover of nature, the trees, the birds, and all things great and small that God had made gave him sweet fellowship…. He planted trees to provide shade and fruit when he was gone, but more than that, he planted the seeds of kindness in human hearts.

An unpublished manuscript of poems entitled Trees: What Spirits Brood in These, written by her sister Adelaide, illustrated by Nell, and dedicated to the Reverend Danely, vividly demonstrates the impact their father’s passion had on them. It consists of twenty-one poems, each accompanied by a tree illustration, in harmony and coherence with the contemporary Arts and Crafts movement. One poem, entitled “Unity,” features the endangered Torrey pine of Southern California depicted on a rocky promontory overlooking the sea. Adelaide’s poem and Nell’s illustration capture the tree’s harsh natural environment, isolated near the windswept Pacific coast. The poem relates how the “lonely tree” was born of the earth, air, and sea.

Nell’s Torrey pine print is an exquisite example of the influence of traditional Japanese prints in the Arts and Crafts movement. According to Anderson, Nell often worked with sisters May (1872–1951) and Frances Gearhart (1869–1959) of Pasadena, two prominent printmakers. The sisters’ influence is seen in Nell’s prints, especially May’s depiction of a Torrey pine in the etching Point Lobos (c. 1923).

Nell married Sidney Brooker, editor of the Quincy, Illinois, newspaper Optic, in a dual ceremony with her sister Adelaide and Urbana architect Joseph William Royer on October 14, 1902, and this wedding was among the great social events of the season in Urbana-Champaign. Tragically, in July 1903, Nell’s husband died suddenly of heart failure. According to Anderson, Nell “was forever saddened by the loss of her first husband and greatest love.” After his passing, “Mayhew continued to incorporate the name ‘Brooker’ into her signature in tribute to him.”

Though she primarily worked as a painter and printmaker, Nell crossed over into the practice of architecture in various ways. Nell participated directly when assisting her sister Adelaide, a talented
Nell Brooker Mayhew and Arts and Crafts

professional interior designer who collaborated with her husband, Joseph Royer, on many architectural projects. One of the earliest known projects credited to Nell was a series of murals she developed for the Royers’ new residence in Urbana between 1904 and 1905. The Spanish Mission–style house, designed by Royer, had an exterior surface of cement made to resemble stucco. Royer was distinctly inspired by Gustav Stickley, and the first house designed for Stickley’s Craftsman Workshops in 1904 was erected in the California Mission style with a similar concrete exterior surface and typical Craftsman elements in the interior. A photo taken in a second-floor room during the Royer occupation of the house exhibited a range of Craftsman traits including a “stucco” fireplace, a decorative frieze along the top of the walls below the ceiling, and wicker furniture. Arguably, this interior design project was produced by Adelaide Royer. The first-floor dining room also revealed several Craftsman features, including Nell’s murals.21

Although signatures could not be found on any of the murals, they are undoubtedly Nell’s work according to Frank Goss, former owner of the Sullivan Goss Gallery in Santa Barbara, California, home to an extensive collection of Mayhew’s works.22 Goss acknowledged the murals provide excellent examples of her early style, before she resettled west. The murals appear to have been part of the original design of the room, with panels above the wainscoting reserved for the artwork, which
Figure 3.3 Royer Residence, Urbana, IL, dining room murals by Nell Brooker Mayhew, c. 1905. View to west.

Source: Valerie Oliveiro.

Nell installed herself, as was typical of the Arts and Crafts period. The murals were painted on canvas attached to the walls, a technique impressively outlined by her former instructor Newton Wells.23

The west wall integrated three mural panels and two small square windows with lace-like metal work. The central panel featured a landscape with a stream near the bottom and a partial tree-lined ridge crest near the top. The smaller minor panels at the north and south ends of the wall connected to the primary arboreal theme of the central panel.

The mural on the north wall is composed of four panels. The first panel, located east of an arched doorway, depicts a view from a birch forest toward an open valley with a winding stream. Immediately west of the arched door are three additional murals. Of these, the eastern panel depicts a curving road along a stream emerging from the woods, the central panel presents a view toward the stream and a village on the far shore, and the western panel reveals another view of a forest.

The panels of the south wall mural feature a pastoral scene showing a grassy ridge and a forest in the distance, with a large tree near the ridge crest on the central panel, a vivid reminder of two other works by Nell, an etching and a painting both entitled By the Sea.24

Nell’s murals in the Royer Residence represent a prime example of collaboration between artist and architect during the Arts and Crafts period. The dining room with her pastoral images was a classic model of Stickley’s idealist decorative scheme and could very well have been inspired by prototypes featured in his publication The Craftsman:

The frieze, which is an important feature in the decoration of this room, may either be stenciled on the plaster, or one of the English paper friezes, introducing some of the wood browns in the foreground, with foliage effects in soft greens and in the glow of the distance a rich yellow.25
Figure 3.4  Royer Residence, Urbana, IL, detail of north dining room mural by Nell Brooker Mayhew, c. 1905.  
Source: Valerie Oliveiro.

Figure 3.5  Royer Residence, Urbana, IL, detail of south mural by Nell Brooker Mayhew, c. 1905.  
Source: Valerie Oliveiro.
Nell also completed murals for the Mills Petrie Memorial Building in Ashton, Illinois, a building designed in 1936 by Joseph Royer’s architectural firm in the Art Deco style.26 Apparently, the foyer “originally displayed a large wall mural depicting a country scene.”27 Aside from this reference to Nell’s work, no other information about the original mural has yet been located. Based on Nell’s murals for the Royer Residence, a “country scene” theme would be in line with her known mural projects. In the 1970s it was replaced by other murals, and to date no details about that magnificent artwork have been discovered.28

Among Nell’s later collaborations with Adelaide was a residence designed by her husband Joseph in 1946 for Jay Helms in Rockingham, North Carolina.29 Interior photographs of the house from the 1980s depicted a large painting of sycamore trees, displayed over the fireplace. The painting, signed by Nell, was inspected by Frank Goss, who identified the trees as “her iconic symbol for California sycamores” and the hills of the valley as located “where the Pasadena Freeway is today.”30

Settling in California

After completing her studies in 1908, Nell moved to Los Angeles, where she established an art studio in the Mt. Washington area of the Arroyo Seco. This was a fitting place for Nell, as the climate and natural beauty of the area has attracted and inspired artists to the present day.31 In 1910, she joined the faculty at the College of Fine Arts at the University of Southern California in Pasadena and by 1911 had married attorney/poet Leonard Mayhew; the couple would have two daughters, Mary Jane and Nell.32 Nell’s Mt. Washington residence included a spectacular hillside garden opened to the public every Thursday.33

In the second decade of the twentieth century, Nell began her most recognized works, the California mission color etchings, and Nell’s talent as an interior designer blossomed again in the early 1920s when she was commissioned to prepare about one hundred etchings each for the Ambassador Hotels in Los Angeles and New York. Around 1930, she established the Nell Brooker Mayhew Little Gallery in West Hollywood, became well known for her paintings of trees, and, in her later years until her passing in September of 1940, was active as a passionate advocate of wildlife preservation.

Documenting California’s Old Spanish Missions

Just prior to 1920, during the Arts and Crafts period, Nell remarkably championed architecture in Southern California through her depictions and international exhibitions of the old Spanish missions established between 1769 and 1823 by Mexican Franciscan friars, who brought Christianity to the Indian tribes of California. Following secularization of the missions in 1834, the decline started, church land was divided into private ranchos, native populations scattered, and assets were looted.34 Mission structures quickly deteriorated until in most cases, only a church and nearby buildings remained.

By the mid-nineteenth century, concern for the plight of the missions took over, and between 1855 and the 1870s mission property was deeded back to the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Francisco. However, the damage had been done and many missions continued to vanish due to neglect. Ultimately, the tide turned in the late nineteenth century when artists and photographers rediscovered the remains of the missions and depicted them as the romantic ruins of a lost past. At the same time, travel guides recorded the old missions as tourist destinations and contributed to the appeal for their preservation.35

By the 1880s, attempts at preservation of the missions, especially the churches, were underway. In 1884, Helen Hunt Jackson’s publication of the novel Ramona, which presented a romanticized vision of life at the California missions and was referred to as the “mission myth,” added to the fervor...
of preservation, which led to the founding of many organizations dedicated to sustaining historical sites, including the missions. Among these were the Historical Society of Southern California (1883), the Association for the Preservation of the Missions (1888), and the Landmarks Club of Southern California (1895). The rise of automobile tourism led to the creation of the “El Camino Real,” a network of roads connecting the missions.

By 1902, the old missions were recognized as prime examples of the ideals and goals of the Arts and Crafts movement. Poet Edwin Markham recognized this, elaborating on the nature, simplicity, and handcraftsmanship represented by the missions in *The Craftsman*:

> Beautiful and harmonious is this architecture, built of humble materials, shaped with rude tools or patient handicraft, all planned in loving sincerity by unskilled builders who had joy and faith in their work…. These buildings have also the beauty that rises from adaptation to the environment. … Built of the earth, these old structures seem at times as if not made by man but by Nature.36

The drive to preserve the missions impacted the world of architecture, leading to the popularity of the Spanish Mission style in the early twentieth century. In 1904, Stickley published passionate articles on the missions in the *Craftsman* magazine, and the first design featured in his Craftsman Workshops rendered in the California Mission style appeared the same year as the personal residence was designed by Joseph Royer.

Nell’s color etchings of the California missions brought her international acclaim and proved to become her best-known trailblazing artwork, which according to Anderson, was:

> Mayhew’s most highly regarded group of pieces. To create the works, she and her daughters drove almost the entire length of California so she could make sketches of all twenty-one of the remaining Spanish missions.37

Nell later produced a powerful, impressive collection of etchings printed on handmade paper as her unique pioneering vision of time and place.

She sensibly admitted that:

> when first I was intrigued into making a tour of the missions, I thought it might become a bit tiresome for I expected to find the same architectural plan executed for each mission. Imagine my delight at being entirely mistaken. No two missions are alike; each one was built by the plan needed for the particular location. It seems as if there had been the artist’s joy in creating each design a new idea.38

This passage reveals Nell’s recognition of the connection between the mission architecture and its natural setting.

In November 1923, Nell returned to Urbana for an exhibit of these etchings at Adelaide and Joseph’s home.39 The local newspaper highlighted it as “a poem of artistry” by emphasizing “the exquisite colorings and restful peace that seem to permeate the mission atmosphere of these delightful sketches” and declared it a “unique and distinctive … work never before undertaken by an artist of note.”40 The trailblazing efforts of Nell Mayhew have been recognized as remarkable accomplishments of the time, with reference to the lasting impact of her initiative, talent, and strategy, as well as the process of production of the collections:

> Mrs. Mayhew spent two years going from mission to mission, striving to get in touch with the real spirit and glamour that makes these historic structures so interesting and enticing.
to the people of modern times. ... There are only seventeen of these famous old structures still in existence, and Mrs. Mayhew has immortalized each of them in dreamy sketch, some showing the building entire, other picturesque portions in the most charming effect imaginable.\

The display in Urbana was followed by the exhibition in Chicago at “one of the leading art galleries.”\

In 1933 Nell’s influence on architecture was efficiently validated when she was invited to exhibit her work in conjunction with a lecture on the Spanish missions by architectural historian Rexford Newcomb, Dean of the College of Applied and Fine Arts at the University of Illinois in Urbana, together with a display of two hundred mission photographs by a renowned photographer, Hugh Pascal Webb. Newcomb had devoted much of his career to documenting the Spanish missions and researching Spanish American architecture, and this exhibition was clearly aimed at preserving and increasing awareness of the Southern California missions. In the preface to his 1916 volume, he addressed his philosophy and thus his great approval of Nell’s accomplishment:

The purpose of the writer in making the present series of studies was to assist in a practical way, the cause of architecture by recording by means of notes, drawings and photographs, the real spirit and detail of these buildings so well adapted and appropriate to the land of their inception, before the last vestige of the buildings themselves had disappeared from the earth.

Hugh Pascal Webb was the husband of the American author Edith Buckland Webb, who, before Nell moved to Los Angeles in 1908, was inspired by the renewed interest in California’s Spanish heritage and began years of exhaustive research into Indian life at the missions. Hugh assisted her by taking over two thousand photographs of the missions. Eventually publishing the results of her research in book form, Edith had planned to use the information to paint accurate pictures of the missions in their prime, but she passed away before completing the project.
Nell's etchings and exhibitions in the Midwest fueled the nationwide spread of the Mission style. Noted architectural historian Professor Richard Guy Wilson emphasized the nationwide rebirth of interest in preserving the vanishing structures thanks to the empowering efforts of new masters such as Nell Brooker Mayhew; yet—characteristically—she was mentioned anonymously, with no reference to her name as one of major creative forces behind the process:

In the 1870s and 1880s, some transplanted easterners recognized the romance of the missions built under Spanish rule. In the writings of Helen Hunt Jackson and others, the crumbling bell towers, ruined sun-struck adobe walls, shady arcades and red tile roofs struck a poignant note. Mission features began to appear in some architectural projects. … By the early 1900s, fascination with the Mission style had hit the east coast.47

He reevaluated the meaning of such work and dedication by summarizing the chronologies of the “new blood” and the evolutionary prospects of the trend. The result was a flood of Mission-styled buildings, not only in California and the Southwest but across the country, and also the application of the term “Mission style” to many of the other products of the Arts and Crafts movement.48

Conclusion

Discovering Nell’s contribution to the world of architecture through the lens of her intense creativity and unveiling her pioneering work as interior designer and muralist provided us with a massive perspective for further research of the broad range of her records less known than her artwork. While currently revealed histories would be explained in part by the success of her California mission etchings, for which she received national and international recognition, those are evidently overshadowing her other magnificent achievements.

As murals are intended to be permanent parts of a structure, Nell's contribution to the built environment is evident. She also firmly believed that artwork should be accessible to all and “portable” enough to permit patrons to periodically change their pieces should they tire of them. To this end also, as a successful and liberal entrepreneur, she established an art rental business, the Lending Libraries of Pictures, allowing individuals unlimited access to her grounding artwork—exhibit pieces in their homes—with the option to purchase.49

Overcoming tragic losses in her personal life, Nell nevertheless retained the strength and courage to persevere and continue to contribute her unique vision of beauty to the world of art and architecture. Rooted in the rural Midwest, Nell's talent would flourish following her move to the West Coast, far from her childhood friends and family. As a single mother, she would conquer the hardships of the Depression years by giving private painting lessons and trading her works.50

She fully acknowledged the stylistics and philosophy behind her etchings, conformed to the principles of the Arts and Crafts movement: “A print, too, is a hand-made thing, made by the artist with all the care and joy with which he makes a far more expensive oil painting.”51 Her depictions of the California Spanish missions, recognized in the early twentieth century for the successful combination of natural simplicity and the appeal to architecture, reached an international audience and demonstrated to the world the Arts and Crafts movement had found fertile ground from coast to coast in America. These etchings greatly contributed to the advancement of the renewed interest in Spanish Mission architecture and the dissemination of this information beyond Southern California. Preservation efforts intensified and continue to this day, following creative efforts of Nell Brooker Mayhew and other role models who visited and documented the original mission sites.52

Nell Brooker Mayhew was a remarkable, pioneering artist who translated ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement into the realm of architecture in the form of murals and interior design projects.
Brian Adams

This aspect of her life, still less known than her famous etchings and paintings, vividly demonstrates her expansive range of creative talents and opens vistas for new discoveries.

Notes


2. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a fine art and literary society influenced by the simplicity, attention to detail, and brilliant color found in the early Italian painters before Raphael and by the writings of John Ruskin, who urged artists “to go to nature in all singleness of heart.” See: John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 1 (Sunnyside, Orpington, Kent: George Allen, 1888), 417. Members of this society included Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and William Morris.


4. Ibid.


22. Personal communication of author with Frank Goss, February 25, 2011.


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32. Nell divorced Leonard Mayhew in 1926.
35. Ibid.
38. Turner and Dailey, Nell Brooker Mayhew, 4.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
52. Currently only ten original church buildings survived. Kimbro et al., The California Missions.

Bibliography


