Anna Katharine Green

Charles and Ray Eames, Russel and Mary Wright, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret MacDonald—the artistic collaboration of such husband and wife teams is now understood as an important aspect of twentieth-century design. In some of these joint enterprises, the wives functioned as administrators or business women; in others the collaborative endeavor was considerably more artistic. For the furniture designer Charles Rohlfis (Fig. 3) and his wife, Anna Katharine Green (Fig. 1), the intermeshing of theater and literature, design and the home, and art and life was the defining characteristic of their marriage.

One of the most enigmatic and celebrated American designers of the early twentieth century, Rohlfis is today represented in leading museum collections around the country. Despite his fame, however, the role of Green, better known as a successful mystery novelist of the late nineteenth century, as his first and only design collaborator has been virtually unknown to curators and scholars of decorative art until recently. In this article I will present information about Green's life and art gleaned from the
Rohlf's family papers, many of which were recently donated by their great-granddaughter to the Winterthur Library. I will also analyze a number of decorative works by Rohlf's and Green that have never been fully documented. This examination will be founded on detailed background information on the crucial moment, around 1888, when they first created furnishings for their own use.

Fig. 1. Anna Katharine Green (1846–1935) in a photograph taken c. 1880. Rohlf's family archive.

Figs. 2, 2n. Hall chair probably designed by Rohlf's and Green, c. 1899, and made by Rohlf's, Buffalo, New York, 1904. Impressed with the R in bow saw mark and the date 1904 on the back of the rear seat rail. Oak; height 54 1/8, width 19, depth 19 inches. See also Fig. 10. Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of the American Decorative Art 1900 Foundation in honor of Glenn Adamson; photograph by Gavin Ashworth.

Fig. 3. Charles Rohlf's (1853–1936) in the role of Dixon in One Hundred Wives, performed in Philadelphia on November 1, 1880. Collection of the American Decorative Art 1900 Foundation.

Fig. 4. Desk chair probably designed by Rohlf's and Green, and made by Rohlf's, Buffalo, c. 1898–1899. A Rohlf's paper label inscribed "84 Carved Desk Chair" is nailed to the bottom of the seat. Oak; height 54, width 16, depth 16 1/4 inches. The chair descended in the Rohlf's family. Metropolitan Museum of Art, American Decorative Art 1900 Foundation gift in honor of Joseph Cunningham; Ashworth photograph.

By Joseph Cunningham
Rohls married Green on November 25, 1884, at the South Congregational Church in Brooklyn, New York. In the midst of their mutual successes over the next several years—Green's flurry of publishing and Rohls's achievements in acting and industrial design—on July 29, 1887, the couple and their children (twenty-three-month-old Rosamond and newborn Sterling) moved upstate to Buffalo. Rohls's work in industrial design had yielded him a number of patents for stove designs and a job offer in the "Queen City of the Great Lakes" from Sherman S. Jewett and Company. Buffalo was to be their home for the next forty-five years. Here they continued earlier efforts to design and make furniture for themselves that was appropriate to their artistic taste.

For the earliest mention of Rohls's design and manufacture of furniture, we must return to the months just before the move to Buffalo. In a diary entry dated March 20, 1887, he wrote, "We have a mahogany chair in the corner of the stair-landing. Rosamond was the first to sit in it—it is her chair. . . . This chair together with the mahogany mantel-shelves in the dining room are specimens of designing and workmanship of Rosamond's Mother and Father, both pieces of furniture being recent additions to our stock." The offhand nature of the reference to the mahogany chair is notable in that Rohls neither declared it his first furniture effort nor made much of it as an addition to our stock. Thus, by March 1887, he had quite possibly been designing and making furniture for several months, if not years. Equally important is the casual revelation that the objects were examples of the design and workmanship of both Rohls and Green. That her contribution is not highlighted suggests that this was by no means the first time they had collaborated on furniture for their house.

In addition to her literary career and the general decoration of the family's houses, Green's artistic pursuits are known to have included watercolor painting and the illumination of poetry. Probably in the 1860s, perhaps during her years at Ripley Female College (now Green Mountain College) in Poultney, Vermont, she created a set of illuminated poems entitled "Songs from the Poets" (see Fig. 6), a beautifully rendered set of drawings with text that provides compelling evidence that she had a role in the design of the settee in Figure 5, which is almost certainly the earliest surviving object created by Rohls and Green. The carved ornamentation on the settee is both whimsical and virtuosic, but it is not integrated into the overall design. Largely kept to the periphery and the center of the seat apron, the ornaments seem to float on the boards they adorn. Those on the interior surfaces of the arm supports resemble plumes ascending dramatically upward before turning back downward and spiraling inward (see Fig. 5a). Such feather motifs, a favorite Victorian design, connect closely to the nineteenth-century decorative styles in which Green had been steeped, as is manifest in the similarly arced ascent of the I that begins her illumination of "The Indian Girl's Song" by Percy Bysshe Shelley (see Fig. 7). Similarly, the lower plumage of the I and the spiraling flourish below the

Fig. 5–5c. Settee designed and made by Rohls and Green, c. 1888, for their own house. Oak with brass screws; height 32 ¾, width 57 ½, depth 23 ¾ inches. Private collection; photographs by Keystone Productions.
B beginning "Break, Break, Break" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (Fig. 8), are related to the smaller feather motif that decorates the upper right and left posts of the settee (see Fig. 5b). The case for Green's role in the decoration of the settee strengthens as we turn to the ends of the seat apron, where tripartite scrollwork spins two secondary curves off a central spiral (see Fig. 5c). This triple-curve motif figures prominently throughout her illuminations, perhaps most clearly in the delicately meandering design below the T in "Take, O take those lips away," from the opening lines of act 4 of Measure for Measure by Shakespeare, one of hers and Rohlf's favorite writers (Fig. 6). Title page of "Songs from the Poets" by Green, 1860s. Watercolor on paper; 12 ½ by 9 ½ inches. Rohlf's family archive.

Fig. 7. Illumination for "The Indian Girl's Song" by Percy Bysshe Shelley, by Green, in her "Songs from the Poets," 1860s. Watercolor on paper; 12 ½ by 9 ½ inches. Rohlf's family archive.

Fig. 8. Illumination for "Break, break, break" by Alfred Lord Tennyson, by Green, in her "Songs from the Poets," 1860s. Watercolor on paper; 12 ½ by 9 ½ inches. Rohlf's family archive.

Fig. 9. Illumination for "Take, O take those lips away," from the opening lines of act 4 of Measure for Measure by William Shakespeare, by Green, from her "Songs from the Poets," 1860s. Watercolor on paper; 12 ½ by 9 ½ inches. Rohlf's family archive.

9. The more modernist geometric designs carved into the ends of the seat and on the feet are likely by Rohlf, while a symmetrical motif in the center of the apron could be the design of either husband or wife. However, its trailing rhythmic dotting appears frequently in Green's work, such as below the ornament framing the small watercolor seascape at the bottom of "Break, break, break."

Taken together, these comparisons make a strong case for Green having played an essential role in the ornamentation of this earliest known Rohlf object and thus for the claim that the couple collaborated on furniture previously attributed to Rohlf alone. This really should not be too surprising because Rohlf and Green worked together in other creative efforts. While touring Europe in 1890, they collaborated on various drawings in the family's travelogue and on a second dramatization of her most successful novel, The Leavenworth Case of 1878. Rohlf would later take the lead role in a national tour of the production of that drama in 1891, which marked his return to the stage.

Rohlf did not pursue furniture making as a profession until around 1897, after his acting career had fizzled, but even then Green contributed to his furniture designs. In January 1900, in the first article published about Rohlf's furniture, Charlotte Moffitt noted Green's contributions, reporting in House Beautiful that Rohlf's "furniture is not turned out rapidly, for, excepting for the assistance of his wife, who is better known as Anna Katharine Green, Mr. Rohlf does the work himself."® Green's role in at least two important works is confirmed by visual analysis and archival records. Around 1898 to 1899, within two years of establishing himself as a furniture maker, Rohlf began work on what has become his most iconic work, which he called the "Graceful Writing Set."8 Comprising the only two objects he ever produced in any significant numbers—a fretted tall-back chair and a carved and fretted fall-front desk that swivels on a footed base (Figs. 2, 10)—the set was first published in 1900.9 Adorning the top of the desk are carved and fretted flame-like finials made of seemingly interlocking strands of oak, each actually carved from a single piece of wood. Evidence that Green contributed to the design is found on the cover of her novel Doctor Isadore (1895), which shows a graphic image of a flame (Fig. 11, right) that relates closely to her illuminations and also bears an unmistakable resemblance to the design of the desk's finials. A monumental canopied bed by Rohlf also featured carved motifs that closely resemble...
graphic elements from the cover of a book by Green. Although its whereabouts is unknown today, the bed descended through the Rohlf's family and is shown in the period photograph in Figure 12. The panels of carved wildflowers recall the sinuous tall-stemmed ones on the cover of Green's *Lost Man's Lane*, published in 1898 (Fig. 11, left). This cover graphic, expressing an elegant femininity that suggests she designed it, reinforces our understanding of Green's contributions to motifs on Rohlf's decorative art. Inscribed on the back of the photograph are the model number "32," the price "$350" (the highest documented price for a Rohlf's object), and "Anna K Rohlf's," underscoring her connection to the bed. Michael James has suggested that it was made for Green, but given that it was exhibited by Rohlf's at the Pan-American Exposition in 1901, and that the price suggests that it was meant for sale, it seems more likely that the notation indicates that the bed was designed with her input, and not that it was a singular piece made for her.

Fig. 10. Rotating desk probably designed by Rohlf's and Green and made by Rohlf's, Buffalo, c. 1899. Impressed with the R in bow saw mark at the left above the writing surface inside the fall-front section. White oak with iron hardware; height 56 1/2, width 25 1/2, depth 24 inches. With the chair in Fig. 2, it comprised what Rohlf's called the "Graceful Writing Set." Dallas Museum of Art.

Fig. 11. Covers of Green's *Lost Man's Lane* (New York, 1898) and *Doctor Izzard* (New York, 1895), both probably designed by Green, Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California.
Among the most exquisite of all Rohlf's objects is the desk chair in Figure 4, made around 1898 or 1899. Its design is radical and the carving sublime. James, who labeled it a "Ladies' Desk Chair," suggested that it too was designed by Rohlf's for his wife, but I believe he collaborated with him on the design, and I have not found any evidence to suggest that this work of sculptural furniture was intended particularly for ladies. A sepia photograph of the chair in the Rohlf's family archive is inscribed on pencil on the back, "15/Desk Chair/Anna K. Rohlf's," while the chair itself bears a Rohlf's workshop paper label inscribed "4 Carved Desk Chair." The presence of number models on the photograph and the label (why "4" in one place and "15" in the other has not been determined) suggests that the chair was intended for sale, and nowhere is it specifically denoted as made for Green. In fact, her name as given in the inscription on this photograph and on one of the chairs previously discussed is not one by which she is otherwise ever referred to—not in letters, diaries, or other communications as a wife, mother, or author—and almost certainly includes her participation with her husband in the design of these pieces of furniture. The carving on the chair back, representing a magnification of the cellular structure of oak, may reflect her mystery writer's interest in science, for she was one of the very first writers to employ scientific evidence as a crucial part of her murder mysteries and courtroom dramas.

Charlotte Moffitt's article in House Beautiful illustrated a "coal-box," or "Coal Hod," as Rohlf's referred to it (Fig. 13). The swirling scrolls that envelop the hinges and handle on the lid float almost carelessly across the oak surface. Perhaps the ornament was an afterthought, something Rohlf's added as an embellishment after conceiving the overall structure, without attending to its lack of integration with the carved legs and stretchers below. Once again, however, the decoration is similar to Green's illuminations in "Songs from the Poets." Moreover, the disconnection of the ornamental carving from the whole is reminiscent of that on the settee discussed earlier and may be an indicator of her participation. For a later, 1901, example of the coal hod, Rohlf's created an exquisitely carved motif that is much better integrated with the form. I have found little evidence for Green's involvement in Rohlf's designs after 1900. But in all their endeavors they shared a lifelong commitment to each other and a love of art and design, as the works illustrated and discussed here so clearly demonstrate.

1 Entry dated March 20, 1887, in the diary kept by Charles Rohlf's and Anna Katharine Green for their children Rosamond and Sirmung Rohlf's, Charles Rohlf's Papers, Joseph Downs Collection, Winterthur Library, Delaware.
2 Rohlf's pictured the settee in a drawing entitled "Corner in the study of Anna Katharine Green" of c. 1888, which is illustrated in Joseph Cunningham, "Conversations in eastern New York: Charles Rohlf's and Gustav Stickley," The Magazine Antiques, vol. 178, no. 5 (May 2008), p. 122, Fig. 6.
6 Michael L. James, Drama in Design: The Life and Craft of Charles Rohlf's (Burchfield Art Center, Buffalo State College, Buffalo, 1994), p. 63.
7 Ibid., p. 67.

JOSEPH CUNNINGHAM, the curator of the American Decorative Art 1900 Foundation in New York, is organizing a traveling exhibition entitled The Artistic Furniture of Charles Rohlf's, opening at the Milwaukee Art Museum next year, and he is the author of the accompanying monograph.