

# ***MAKERS' MARKS***

**ART, CRAFT AND THE FIBER OF CHANGE**

Emma Welty

Nichols House Museum



To S.C.W.



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# ***DIRECTOR'S NOTE***

Victoria McKay  
Executive Director

*Makers' Marks; Art, Craft and the Fiber of Change* is the first exhibition of its kind for the Nichols House Museum. A lynchpin of the museum's vision is to connect the ideas that were important to the Nichols family to contemporary culture. This exhibition is an important step towards realizing that vision. Historic house museums allow us to experience a moment in time. Activating that moment with contemporary work that responds to the space and its history brings to the fore the notion that innovation and creative expression live on a continuum of time, with each moment, each movement building on the last.

At the Nichols House Museum, we spend a lot of time thinking about what it means to be a historic house museum in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Makers' Marks* activates the museum and creates an unexpected experience for our visitors. This exhibition allows us to introduce new audiences to the Nichols House Museum, and historic house museums at large. It also provides an introduction of contemporary craft concepts to the historic house museum audience. Finally, and importantly, it allows us to support the work of artists and makers, which was an important part of the Nich-

ols family's legacy. Making was not only an idea in the Nichols household, but a revered practice. On the opposite page, is a photograph of Rose Nichols' sewing tools. These objects are rarely exhibited, but remain a personal favorite, not only for their intricate beauty, but also because they symbolize the lifelong dedication to embroidery, needlepoint and sewing that was a significant outlet for Rose's creative expression.

*Makers' Marks; Art, Craft and the Fiber of Change* is the culmination of the efforts of a number of people and organizations, many of whom are enumerated in the acknowledgements page. I would like to take a moment to personally thank those who have made this exhibition, catalog and series of programs possible. I would be remiss to not call out the tremendous efforts of Emma Welty, Head of Collections and Education, whose ingenuity, creativity and unyielding commitment to authenticity made this exhibition possible.

While no single book or exhibition can capture the extent to which the practice of craft influences culture, it is my hope that this catalog and exhibit inspire you to consider the ongoing value of creative expression.

Left: 1961.185.1, Interior of black lacquer and gilded sewing box, Chinese, early to mid-19th century, Nichols House Museum Permanent Collection

# FOREWORD

Nonie Gadsden

Katharine Lane Weems Senior Curator of American Decorative Arts and Sculpture, Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

No person or organization lives within a vacuum, unaffected by larger social, political and economic trends of their times. The Nichols family was no exception. The activities, values, and possessions of the Nichols family reflect the Boston community in which they lived over 100 years ago. The Nichols House Museum strives to connect those interests with today's community, drawing insightful parallels or contrasts to inspire thoughtful conversations. By learning about the past, we can better understand and contextualize the present.

The *Makers' Marks* exhibition is the museum's first attempt to connect current day trends in handmade craft practice with the craft-making interests of the Nichols family and their contemporaries in the late nineteenth century. Like many of today's craft practitioners who are often rebelling against our increasingly digital and virtual world, craft proponents of the late nineteenth century reacted against industrialization and the dehumanizing effects of the machine on everyday life. Several members of the Nichols family actively participated in this international craft revival, which came to be called the Arts and Crafts movement.

The Arts and Crafts movement was inspired by the philosophies of British theorists John Ruskin and William Morris. These men and their followers closely linked art and the rest of life. They wanted to bring back joy, beauty and morality in society through artistic activity and handcraftsmanship. They encouraged people to look to the pre-industrial past and distant cultures for design and lifestyle guidance and also to study nature and



1961.63.1 Carved wood panel by Rose Standish Nichols, Nichols House Museum Permanent Collection.



the local world around them for inspiration.

Arts and Crafts ideas found a ready audience in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Boston particularly due to their resonance with the earlier writings of the New England Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who also called for a rejection of modern society and industrialization, a return to nature, and the importance of individual joy.

Boston served as the intellectual hub of the Arts and Crafts movement in the United States, spreading Arts and Crafts ideas nationally through its numerous schools and educational organizations, its many publications, and the national leadership of the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston, one of the first and the most influential Arts and Crafts Society in the United States. Art and craft training was not only introduced into the Boston public school system and numerous immigrant

settlement programs, but all members of society, young and old, rich and poor, male and female, were encouraged to explore the benefits of hand-craftsmanship.

The inclusivity of the Arts and Crafts movement offered new opportunities for women, such as the Nichols sisters, to explore a wider range of crafts, both as a hobby and as a profession. Many women broke away from the traditional domestic crafts of needlework and china painting, and tackled and excelled at crafts previously believed to be too strenuous or unpleasant for the feminine soul, such as woodworking and metalworking.

The *Makers' Marks* exhibition highlights the pioneering role of the Nichols family women in embracing the Arts and Crafts movement, as well as the legacy of that movement on the craft community today.



Rose Standish Nichol's carved wood panels, now on display in her library, are seen here over the mantle in the "Tapestry Room" in the Nichols family's summer home in Cornish, New Hampshire. ca. 1904—1929.



ARM-CHAIR.  
 WALNUT; SAID TO HAVE BELONGED TO NELL GYVNE. ENGLISH; PERIOD OF  
 CHARLES II. H. 4 FT. 3 IN.; W. 2 FT. GIVEN BY MR. GEORGE DONALDSON.  
 W. 15. VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM.



# INTRODUCTION

Emma Welty

Head of Collections and Education

The Nichols House Museum is home to over 800 objects, 1000 books, 300 photographs, 1200 postcards, and hundreds of pieces of ephemera including letters, drawings, receipts, dinner menus and diaries. These collections have been used for more than half a century to tell the story of a family's life at the turn of the twentieth century.

The objects and archival records that are often the most descriptive of the Nichols family's experience are the pieces made by their own hands. Rose, Marian and Margaret Nichols, having been educated during the Arts and Crafts movement, were well versed in a variety of hand skills. The museum's collection includes their drawings, needlepoint pictures, crewel embroideries, wood carvings, and furniture. Letters and memoirs in the archives also tell of the sisters' experiences learning pottery, leatherwork, basketry, knitting and book binding.

The three Nichols sisters were not simply object makers. While they took advantage of their skills to furnish their own collections, they also utilized their hand skills in order to advocate for people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Through donating handmade objects, teaching lessons in their chosen crafts and working with their sewing circles to raise money for

charitable organizations, they elevated their handcrafts to vehicles for social good.

*Makers' Marks* aims to harness the same spirit of making and community engagement in order to re-activate the spaces the Nichols family occupied. Four local artists were selected by a jury to create site-specific works for the rooms of the Nichols House Museum. Each of the preserved rooms displays a piece by one of the four artists, who worked with traditional techniques and materials that would have been familiar to the Nichols sisters.

This exhibition contextualizes the voices of the four art makers within the home of a Progressive era family in order to expand the museum's interpretation. The artists have thoughtfully investigated concepts that link contemporary issues to the history of the Nichols family, including family dynamics, social structures, domestic life and gender.

As the goal of *Makers' Marks* is to connect the Nichols family's collection with contemporary makers, the exhibition was documented by a contributing artist. The documentation process was informed by the aesthetics of the house, collection and archives.

Above: Library, ca. 1941-1960, Nichols House Museum. Rose Standish Nichols carved the patterning on three of the chairs and created the needlepoint cushions.

Below left: 1961.101.1a, Detail of oak chair, ca. 1900-1940, made by Irving & Casson, carving by Rose Standish Nichols, Nichols House Museum Permanent Collection.

Below center: PC1.701, Postcard, Victoria and Albert Museum, Rose Standish Nichols Postcard Collection.

Below right: Drawing of a chair by Rose Standish Nichols, Nichols Family Papers.



# LABORIOUS DAYS

## MARGARET HOMER NICHOLS AND THE ARTS AND CRAFTS MOVEMENT

Emma Welty

Head of Collections and Education



The history of the Nichols family is often contextualized in the Progressive Era with an emphasis on the “New Woman.”<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth and Arthur Nichols raised their three daughters, Rose, Marian and Margaret, with equality, progress and reform in mind, encouraging them educationally and professionally. All three sisters took strides politically and socially to affect change for women and the working classes. However, this reform-minded family was acting concurrently with another movement sweeping through England and America at the turn of the twentieth century: the Arts and Crafts movement.

Following the growth of Industrialization in the nineteenth century, a group of scholars, artists and makers felt that mechanical fabrication was physically, economically and aesthetically harmful for the maker and the consumer. These individuals, including John Ruskin and William Morris, called for a return of the handcrafts as a way to restore the connection between the maker of an object and its user.<sup>2</sup> The Arts and Crafts movement was not just based on aesthetics but education as well. The leaders of the movement

considered the revival of the handcraft to be just as important socially as aesthetically and economically; as a student who learned to love the labor of making would be a more well-rounded and thoughtful citizen.<sup>3</sup>

Margaret Homer Nichols (later Margaret Homer Shurcliff when she married Arthur Asahel Shurcliff in 1905)<sup>4</sup> is the member of the Nichols family for whom Progressivism and the Arts and Crafts movement most clearly intersected. While she undoubtedly existed as the “New Woman” of her time, calling for women’s suffrage,<sup>5</sup> standing in solidarity with labor strikes, and hosting the first meeting of the Massachusetts branch of the American Civil Liberties Union in her home,<sup>6</sup> she was also a dedicated craftswoman, utilizing her woodworking skills to establish a career for herself and to educate and affect change for others. While women in the Arts and Crafts movement were still held at a disadvantage compared to their male colleagues, Nichols’ interest in hand making in her education, home life and career, supported and complemented her commitment to gender parity and socioeconomic reform in her community.

Left: Nichols with a table and bench of her own making n.d.

## EDUCATION

Margaret Homer Nichols (1879—1959) grew up the youngest of three sisters at 55 Mount Vernon Street. The Nichols sisters grew up with many social and educational values in common, thanks to parents who prioritized their academic and social educations. Throughout their adolescence, each sister developed unique professional goals and passions, or as Nichols put it, “Rose was the artistic one in our family and Marian the scholar. I was content to remain the brawny hard worker.”<sup>7</sup> While Nichols spoke humbly of her own abilities, the sentiment reflects her lifelong focus on hard work and dedication to craft.

Between kindergarten and age thirteen, Nichols attended Mrs. Shaw’s School at eight Marlborough Street.<sup>8</sup> Pauline Agassiz Shaw was an educator and philanthropist in Boston best known for her support of both public and private schools, her advocacy for the importance of kindergarten curriculum,<sup>9</sup> and for establishing the North Bennet Street Industrial School, designed to offer vocational training to recent immigrants to Boston.<sup>10</sup> Mrs. Shaw’s School was progressive for its time, teaching the genders equally and offering courses that female students were not traditionally taught. Nichols studied literature, languages and history alongside geography, mathematics, physics and manual training.<sup>11</sup>

Manual training courses included crafts such as woodworking, pottery, sewing, weaving and metalwork. This type of coursework became increasingly common in Boston schools during the Arts and Crafts movement. Advocates for manual training in schools argued that teaching children handcrafts democratized the arts, making it possible for students to furnish their homes with beautiful objects. Others suggested that it also allowed students to understand the virtue of skilled and



Nichols, 1883.

laborious work.<sup>12</sup>

Nichols’ spirit and enthusiasm for the manual training courses is evident throughout her grade books, describing her work in this discipline as “energetic,” “industrious” and “sometimes spoiled by haste.”<sup>13</sup> Her manual training courses included drawing, clay modeling and sloyd carpentry.

Pauline Agassiz Shaw was instrumental in introducing sloyd, a Swedish manual training technique, not only to Nichols but to the United States. Sloyd, roughly translated from Swedish to mean “physical force, sagacity and skill” was tailored from a traditional method of crafting tools

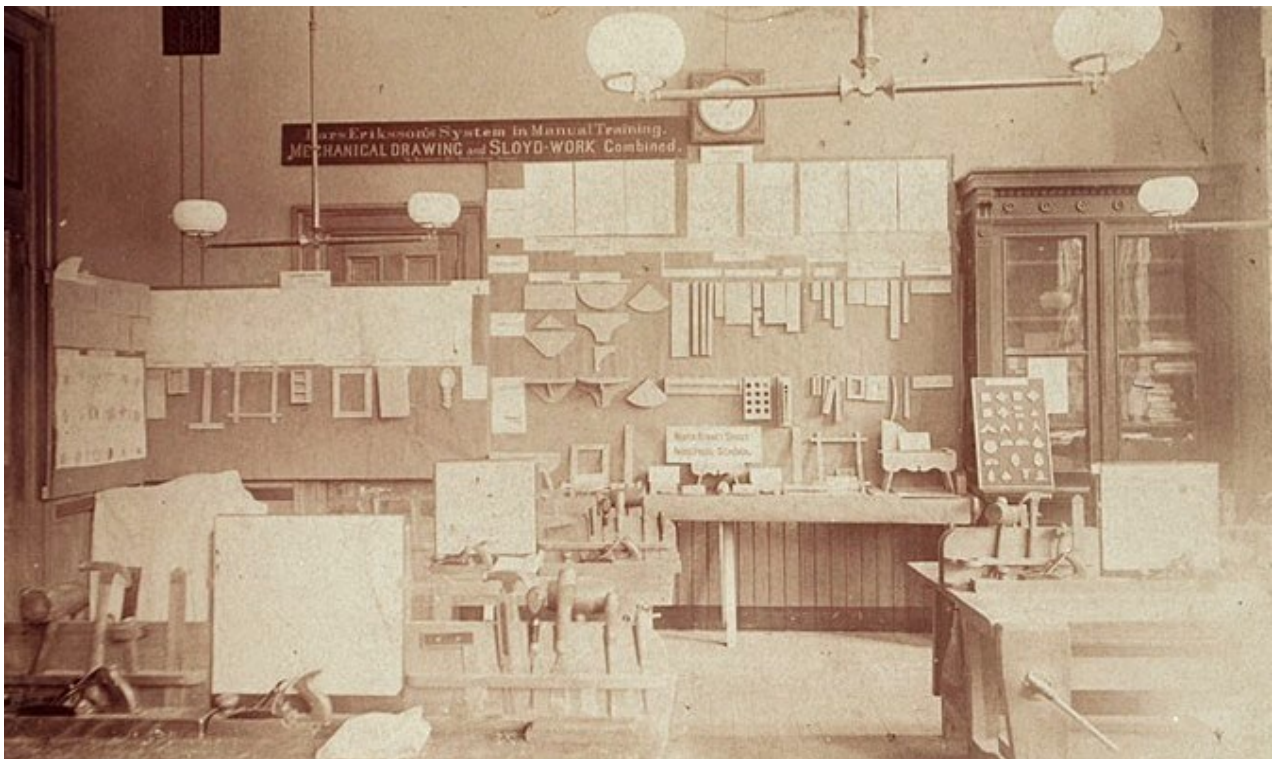
in the pre-industrial domestic sphere, to an educational pedagogy by Otto Salomon in the 1870s.<sup>14</sup> Similar to the leaders of Arts and Crafts Movement in England and the United States, Salomon noticed the impact of industrialization on an individual's sense of aesthetics and craftsmanship. Salomon's curriculum was developed to teach physical and aesthetic skills to children as well as conceptual thinking, resourcefulness, and respect for hard work. Salomon developed a training manual to prepare other teachers to educate children on the principles of sloyd, with detailed instructions outlining methods and exercises arranged from simple to complex.<sup>15</sup>

In 1888, Mrs. Shaw invited Gustaf Larsson, one of Salomon's followers, to Boston. He became the principal of the "Sloyd Training School of Boston" under the umbrella of the North Ben-

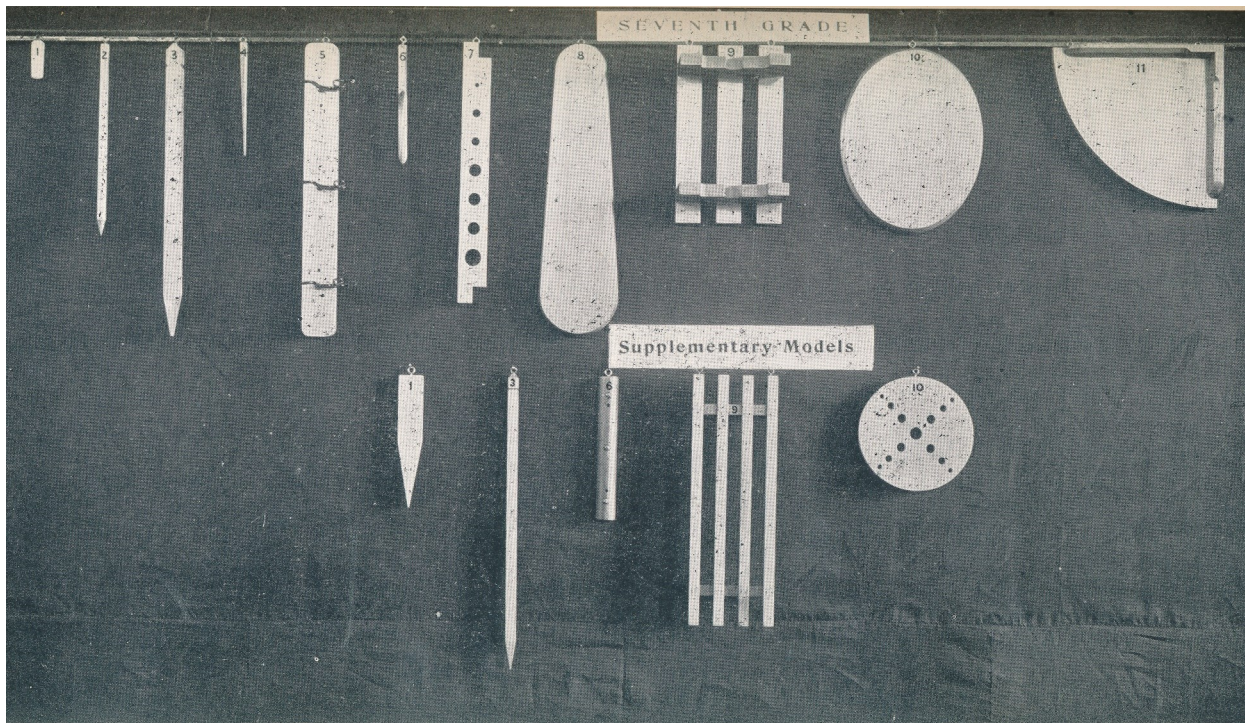
nett Street Industrial School.<sup>16</sup> While sloyd exercises existed in many materials, including wax, clay, paper, pasteboard and metal, sloyd carpentry became the most popular and was taught the most frequently.<sup>17</sup> The sloyd carpentry system focused on creating useful objects, largely shaped with knives, rather than carved on the surface with chisels. Salomon suggested that

wood-carving, classed as it is with the so-called 'finer' kinds of manual work, has a tendency to intensify in the child that contempt for rough bodily labour which has already unfortunately done so much social harm.<sup>18</sup>

As a student at Mrs. Shaw's School, Nichols studied sloyd carpentry under the instruction of Larsson. While the sloyd system suggested that useful objects would peak a child's interest,<sup>19</sup>



North Bennet Street School classroom with mechanical drawing tools and woodworking benches, ca. 1900-1920,



OBJECTS SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN FROM TEN TO TWELVE YEARS OF AGE.

TOOLS FOR EACH BENCH



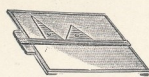
Lead Pencil, No 4.



New Pencil Compass.



Rule, Boxwood 2 ft. 2 fold.



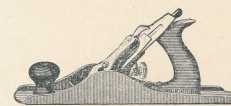
Drawing Kit, 13" x 19".



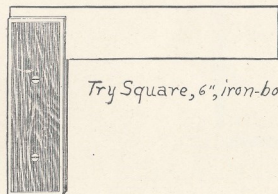
Sloyd Knife, bevelled blade, 3 1/2".



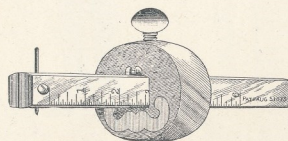
Splitting Saw, 22", 8 pts.



Jack Plane 14", Bailey, iron.



Try Square, 6", iron-bound.



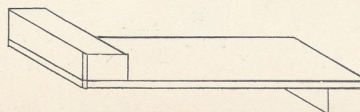
Marking Gauge, oval head



Back Saw, 10", best quality.



Block Plane, 7", Bailey.



Bench Hook, oak.



Spoke Shave, iron



Firmer Chisel, 1"

Illustrations from Gustaf Larsson's, book, American Sloyd.



Nichols was more concerned with the process than the products of the exercises, which included a window wedge and a sleeve board.

The fact that almost none of the objects held the slightest interest for a child when finished did not seem to have entered Mr. Larson's [sic] head...At the time it made no difference to me what I made as long as I could wield the tools.<sup>20</sup>

It is within her sloyd education that Nichols' thoughts on hard work, functionality and craftsmanship originated.

By 1899, almost six years after her time at Mrs. Shaw's School, Nichols maintained an interest in woodworking. In August of that year, she was rejected when she asked her mother, Elizabeth Nichols, if she could purchase her own turning lathe.<sup>21</sup> A month later, Nichols enrolled in a course in carpentry and woodturning during the fall semester at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.<sup>22</sup>

Nichols was not a stranger to MIT—she had taken courses in chemistry and physics the previous year—and by the late nineteenth century, MIT was not wholly unfamiliar with female students. In 1873, six years before Nichols was born, Ellen Henrietta Swallow became the first female graduate of MIT, earning a degree in chemistry, and later becoming a member of the school's faculty.<sup>23</sup> While Ellen Swallow had paved the way for female students in the chemistry department, Nichols' presence in the carpentry work-shop was somewhat unprecedented. Not only was Nichols surprised to find that she was the only woman in a class of fifteen, but so was her instructor, Professor Merrick, who had to offer Nichols his own dressing room upon the realization that there were no facilities for women in the entire building.<sup>24</sup>

Nichols excelled in the class, learning joinery

techniques to make cupboards and bookcases, and woodturning skills to make cups and bowls. She certainly stood out as the only female student, but she also stood out for her strong work ethic. In October 1899, Nichols excelled in another area of her life, athletics. She missed a few of her carpentry courses while she earned several cups in the Longwood Tennis Tournament. Professor Merrick was less than pleased and she recounted their conversation in her memoir, "While you came regularly,' he said, 'you kept ahead of the boys and they had to hustle to catch up, but now they are ahead of you they don't work so well.'"<sup>25</sup>

While Nichols kept up with—and even surpassed—the skills and pace of the male students in her class, her identity as the only woman in the class had an impact on her socially. She remained on formal terms with the young men in her course, never learning their first names or socializing with them outside of class. She told her sister, Rose Nichols, in a letter dated May 1900, after the conclusion of the course, "I keep meaning to go back to the technology work shop and yesterday I got as far as the door but a sudden bashfulness overcame me and I rushed madly by."<sup>26</sup>

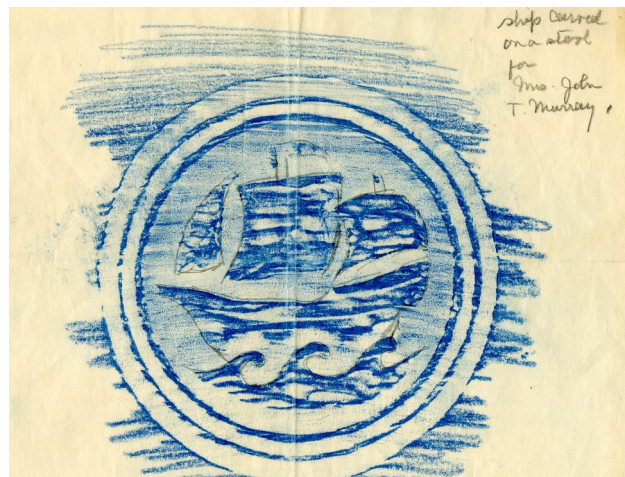
Nichols' early sloyd education had instilled in her a sense of function over form that she carried with her throughout the early stages of her carpentry practice. "All my carpentry models were designed for strength and use only."<sup>27</sup> Despite her obvious respect for Professor Merrick's class at MIT, she also noted his "passion for carving rosettes and scrolls onto every flat surface. His skill outdid his taste."<sup>28</sup> Nichols was credited by her uncle, famed figurative sculptor, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, for telling him that "all art is rot." Despite what seemed to be quite a principled stance on ornamentation, in 1905, at the advice of her husband-to-be, Arthur Shurcliff, she enrolled in

the C. Howard Walker School of Design, now known as the School of the Museum of Fine Arts.<sup>29</sup>

Charles Howard Walker was a Beaux Arts trained architect and a member of the Society of Arts and Crafts Boston jury,<sup>30</sup> who taught design and the history of ornamentation. He was among the leaders in the Arts and Crafts movement in Boston, believing that factory produced goods led to “artisanal indifference.”<sup>31</sup> While Nichols had historically rejected ornamentation in her carpentry practice, she appreciated the design education that she received from Mr. Walker, noting that “his criticism of all the class was the high spot of the week.”<sup>32</sup>



Wood carving by Nichols, n.d.



Rubbing of wood carving by Nichols, n.d.

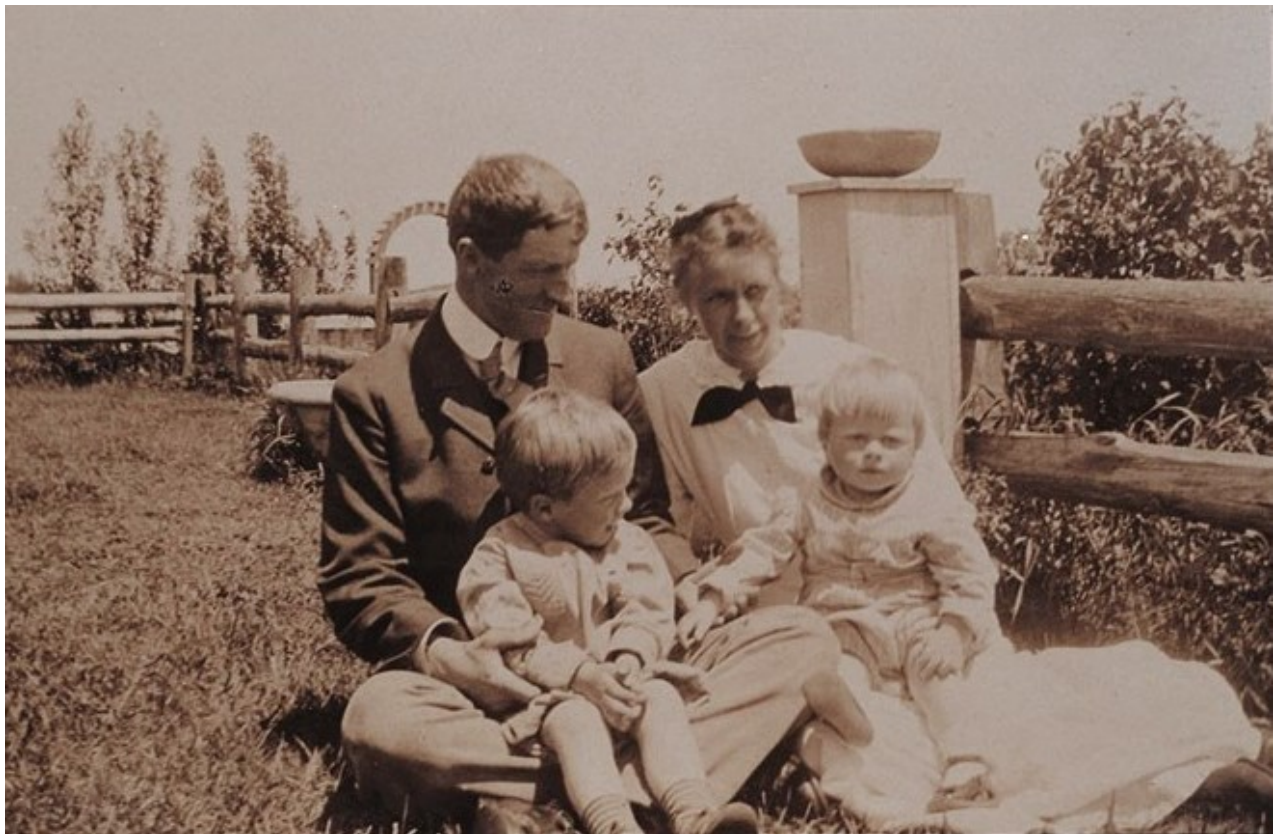
## ***FAMILY***

In 1901 Margaret Homer Nichols met her future husband, Arthur Asahel Shurcliff. While he had grown up around the corner from the Nichols family on Beacon Hill, their first significant meeting was at the Nichols' summer estate in Cornish, New Hampshire. Recounting their courtship, Shurcliff wrote, "It was there I met Margaret Nichols in a blue gown at her house, and later at the railroad station where she was whittling."<sup>33</sup> Shurcliff, a professional landscape architect by trade, also loved carpentry. Another disciple of the Arts and Crafts movement, he followed the writings of John Ruskin and encouraged Nichols to do the same.<sup>34</sup> He believed in making objects by hand whenever possible. He and Nich-

ols were industrious and thoughtful in the way they furnished their spaces and raised their family.

Carpentry was an imperative link in the relationship between the Nichols and Shurcliff. Their shared interest allowed them to work on carpentry projects together throughout their courtship. In a letter from Elizabeth Nichols to her husband Arthur Nichols, she described Nichols and Shurcliff collaborating:

Mr. Shurtleff arrived Saturday evening somewhat late as might be expected for a Saturday before a holiday. He is helping Margaret in carpentry and they have just gone to the mill to have some cherry boards planed for the deck Margaret proposed to make."<sup>35</sup>



Shurcliff and Nichols with their two youngest sons, William and Jack, 1912,



Nichols ca. 1905

Although a trip to the mill may have been an unlikely date for some, Nichols and Shurcliff's relationship often featured collaborative carpentry projects.

When they married in 1905, they set up a carpentry bench at their first home at 50 Mount Vernon Street. Over the course of their marriage, every home they lived in was furnished with a work bench and a lathe. Their permanent home at 66 Mount Vernon Street, which they purchased in 1912, was outfitted with a full carpentry shop in the attic with "many benches for the many children and for carpentering classes Margaret taught there." In 1908 the Shurcliffs purchased a plot of land in Ipswich to serve as the family's summer estate. They designed their home and furnished it largely with furniture of their own making. In 1918 they designed an addition to the building; a large woodshop where Nichols worked and taught lessons during the summer months.<sup>36</sup>

Nichols and Shurcliff had six children: Sidney, Sarah, William, Jack, Elizabeth and Alice. As



Shurcliff traveled frequently for his work as a landscape architect, managing the household often fell to Nichols. In his autobiography, Shurcliff, clearly appreciative of her efforts, described Nichols as

the great educator and guiding spirit, with all of us too well in hand. Under her hand also are carpenter tools, gardening tools, bell ropes, hand bells, the tennis racket, the bicycle handlebars, the daily management of the home and the endless activities which make her the acclaim of all, the indispensable, devoted, and the affectionate one, wholly ours, the friend of all our friends and loved by all who knew her.<sup>37</sup>

Clearly a woman of many talents, Nichols had several facets of her life and career to balance. Because of the need to balance family and work, women in the Arts and Crafts movement often learned and practiced small portable tasks such as embroidery. This was not only due to the necessity to be simultaneously managing their households, but often because of the lack of dedi-



Interior of the Shurcliff family home in Ipswich, 1965.



Interior of the Shurcliff family home in Ipswich, 1965. The table on the left was made by Nichols and the table on the right was made by Shurcliff.





Nichols with her youngest son, Jack, 1912.

cated private work space for women.<sup>38</sup> Nichols, unlike many women, did have the dedicated space to practice her craft, as their homes were both outfitted with carpentry shops.

Nichols also involved her children in the woodworking process. By teaching her children carpentry, she was able maintain her own woodworking practice as well as providing her children,



Nichols with her six children, ca. 1920-1925.

and later her grandchildren, with sustainable skills. All three of her daughters, Sarah, Elizabeth and Alice, became proficient enough to teach carpentry lessons with Nichols in the Ipswich workshop during the summers. Sarah went on to teach lessons independently at their family shop as well as the Fairhope Summer School in Greenwich, Connecticut and the Park School in Brookline.<sup>39</sup>

Left: Exterior of the Shurcliff family home in Ipswich, n.d.

## CAREER

Following Nichols' education in carpentry, she promptly began putting her skills to use as a woodworking instructor. Her first experience with teaching began at the Ellis Memorial Club. She had been volunteering at Ellis Memorial Club in a Wednesday evening group for underprivileged boys. The program consisted of singing and playing games but she soon realized she "could spend the time to better advantage by teaching carpentry." Nichols outfitted a room with benches and tools and began teaching the boys woodworking skills. The students built bookcases, hat racks and "a good type of letter rack with three drawers for which we received many orders." She secured enough orders to pay for the tools and soon the shop made enough money for the boys to be paid for their work.<sup>40</sup> Carpentry became a very popular program that grew from Wednesday evenings to six days a week. After having been the



Nichols in her carpentry smock, ca. 1900.



1961.57, Cherry desk organizer, 20th century. Possibly made by a student of Nichols at the Ellis Memorial Club.



only woman in a class of boys when she took carpentry, she was now a woman teaching a class full of boys. Her students admired and respected her, often inviting her into their homes to see the work they had made being put to use. This experience was enlightening for Nichols, who for the first time in her life, had an image in her mind of the living conditions of poor families in the city.<sup>41</sup>

After the success of teaching at Ellis Memorial Club, Nichols began to give independent carpentry classes. She taught both children and adults lessons, sometimes simultaneously. In a 1902 letter, she tells her sister Marian Nichols, "In the carpentry class are a Miss Blanchard who thinks she knows it all and two small children. I have my hands full."<sup>42</sup> Nichols charged her students fifty cents per lesson, which she often donated to "the club" (presumably Ellis Memorial Club).<sup>43</sup>

Nichols continued teaching after she was married, in 1905, giving lessons at the woodshops she and Shurcliff kept in their homes. She kept a shop at their house in Boston where she gave lessons in the winters, and she had quite a following of students for her summer carpentry courses at the family's Ipswich property. Her notebooks from her summer woodworking courses show over fifty students in attendance from 1936-1938.<sup>44</sup> Nichols' workshop was busy and she developed a reputation in the Ipswich area for her work. A local newspaper from August of 1930 describes:

Inside the workshop at Ipswich may be seen the children's work of the summer. Rustic stools made from worm-eaten pine, and pencil holders made from worm-eaten, small, thick pieces of pine, are a few of the novelties; also tables, the regulation stools of all sizes with peglegs, a bed, a cabinet, and dressers. Everything is of a very practical nature as well as being

carefully and artistically finished, Mrs. Shurcliff makes use of odd pieces of wood she frequently sees going to waste.<sup>45</sup>

The breadth of work happening in her shop suggests students from a range of skill levels and a commitment from the students she worked with. In an interview published by the *Boston Sunday Advertiser* in 1931 she states,

I find that children like to make rather large things rather than small, puttery things. One little girl pupil has almost completely furnished her bedroom. She has made chairs, a table, a bed and book-case, and now wants to make a bureau."<sup>46</sup>

Her notebooks during that time also suggest a shift in who was attending her classes. In the summer of 1936 nearly all the students listed in her notebooks were male; by 1938 the majority of the students were female.<sup>47</sup> By the 1930s, Nichols



Nichols teaching a carpentry lesson, 1933.

also had five people teaching with her, including one of her sons, Jack, and all three of her daughters. While she suggested that “children like being taught by other children”<sup>48</sup> the success of her workshop may have also been due to the gender dynamic. Enlisting a majority of females both to teach and learn, Nichols had created a shop that welcomed women and girls to develop skills considered “unusual for a society woman”<sup>49</sup> that would cause “the lifting of eyebrows in the drawing rooms.”<sup>50</sup>

DURING THE FALL + WINTER  
SARAH P. SHURTLEFF  
OFFERS  
A SERIES OF WEEKLY CLASSES  
IN CARPENTRY + WOODWORK  
TO THE PUPILS OF  
THE LEE SCHOOL  
BEGINNING THE WEEK OF  
OCTOBER 28  
(HOURS TO BE ARRANGED)  
\$1.50 per lesson  
The Carpentry Shop is at  
66 MOUNT VERNON ST.  
BEACON  
HILL

Sarah P. Shurcliff advertisement for carpentry lessons, n.d.

While her work in her Ipswich shop was focused on teaching summer carpentry lessons, back in the family’s Boston house, Nichols ran another business, “Pegleggers: Makers of Benches and Trestle Tables of Pine.”<sup>51</sup> Headquartered at her carpentry shop in the attic of her family’s home at 66 Mount Vernon Street, Nichols, along with two other female carpenters, Charlotte L. Ware and Theodora B. Jones, designed and built early American style furniture using traditional

“PEGLEGGERS”  
Makers of  
BENCHES AND TRESTLE TABLES OF PINE

THEODORA B. JONES CHARLOTTE L. WARE  
MARGARET H. SHURCLIFF  
Carpentry Shop at 66 Mount Vernon Street, Boston, Mass.  
Telephone, Capitol 8096

“Pegleggers” business card, n.d.

“Pegleggers”  
Makers of various & sundry  
Pine Benches and stools

Mrs. Jones Mrs. Shurcliff Mrs. Ware  
carpentry shop at 66 Mt. Vernon St.  
Boston.

Nichols’ drawing of “Pegleggers” business card, n.d.

hand tools.<sup>52</sup> While she had been committed to her carpentry practice since the 1890s, Nichols, along with Ware and Jones, previously a student of Nichols', formally established Pegleggers in the mid-1920s and were almost immediately overcome with orders for their furniture.<sup>53</sup>

The three carpenters worked together to create antique reproduction furniture. Their signature piece was a pine stool, but the workshop also produced chairs, tables, trays and bookstands. The objects crafted in the Pegleggers studio were not only in the Colonial style but also made with antique tools. In 1929, Nichols began collecting early American tools that she then put to use. In an interview in the *Boston Sunday Advertiser* she said, "in former days people made simple things with simple tools."<sup>54</sup> That is what she and the other Pegleggers did.

As a collector, Nichols seemed to further stray from her previous opinion that "all art is rot." She developed a renewed interest in art and she searched for examples of her own tool collection in paintings and prints:

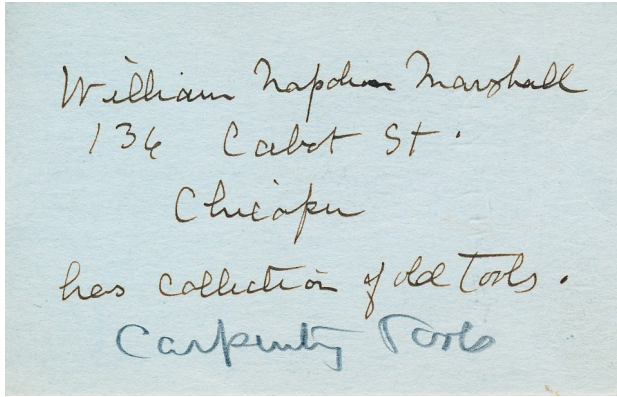
I began to take a new interest in museum pieces; I scanned old paintings and engravings and was astonished by the many vital details they revealed concerning the tools of yesteryears. For example, I have a carpenter's brace or bit-stock used here in America during the 18th century...I found that my bit-stock was almost identical to the carpenter's brace shown in the Flemish wall painting of St. Joseph at work as a carpenter done in 1438 and now in Brussels; while in 1640 Rembrandt painted another bit stock that looks much like it, hanging on the wall of his canvas of the Holy Family.<sup>55</sup>



Rembrandt van Rijn, Holy Family with Angels, 1645.



Workshop of Robert Campin, Annunciation Triptych (Merode Altarpiece), detail, ca. 1427-1432.

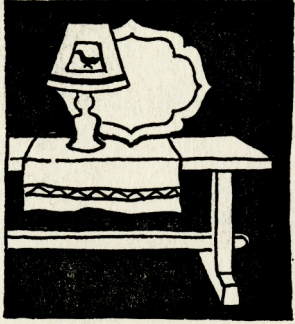


Nichols' handwritten note about a carpentry tool collector, n.d.

Nichols quickly developed an impressive private collection of traditional hand tools with a specific focus on handplanes. By 1935, the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, now called Historic New England, expressed an interest in her collection of hand planes. SPNEA acquired her collection of 176 hand planes<sup>56</sup> with the condition that Nichols be permitted to borrow them back for her personal use at any time.<sup>57</sup>

The Pegleggers put Nichols' collection of tools to good use, meeting in the workshop at 66 Mount Vernon almost every day to work.<sup>58</sup> While they received orders directly, the three craftswomen also represented their business at trade shows in Boston, often hosted by the Hotel Vendome. At these shows, they would frequently exhibit their work alongside other women vendors and artisans including, Alice Means, "Designer of Lampshades," Sophie Nichols,<sup>59</sup> "Importer of Mahalla Fabrics" and Constance Crocker, "Decorator of Old Tin."<sup>60</sup> Occasionally the three carpenters would open their shop to prospective buyers, often inviting Crocker to exhibit her "Hand-Painted Articles" as well.

Participating in a three-person business was a way for Nichols not only to continue her making practice in a financially sustainable way, but it was also a way to connect with and support other



**ALICE MEANS . . . . . DESIGNER OF LAMPSHADES**  
**SOPHIE NICHOLS . . . . . IMPORTER OF MAHALLA FABRICS**  
**CONSTANCE CROCKER . . . . . DECORATOR OF OLD TIN**

**PEGLEGGERS**

**MARGARET H. SHURTLEFF, THEODORA B. JONES**  
**CHARLOTTE L. WARE**  
**MAKERS OF PINE FURNITURE**

**HOTEL VENDOME**  
**BASEMENT ENTRANCE ON**  
**COMMONWEALTH AVENUE**

**TUESDAY, APRIL 8 . . . . . WEDNESDAY, APRIL 9**  
**THURSDAY, APRIL 10 . . . . . FRIDAY, APRIL 11**

"Pegleggers" advertisement, 1930.

women artisans. In addition to her work with her two carpentry partners as well as other female designers through trade shows and exhibitions, she sold wares through a local organization dedicated to advancement for women. The Women's Educational and Industrial Union, a Boston organization founded in the late nineteenth century to support industrial opportunities for women, managed a storefront on Boylston Street called the "Handwork Shop."<sup>61</sup> While Nichols and the Pegleggers sold their work independently, the decision to sell furniture at the "Handwork Shop" meant a portion of the profit was supporting the educational and professional opportunities of other women.<sup>62</sup>



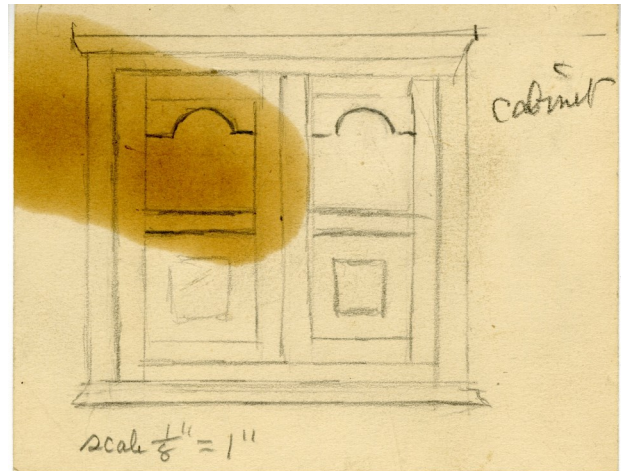
Jones, Nichols and Ware at a "Pegleggers" exhibition, ca. 1930.

In Nichols' memoir she recounted a quote passed down from her father, "shun idle ease, enjoy laborious days."<sup>63</sup> Nichols enjoyed laborious days even in times of recreation. When she was six years old she collected horse chestnuts from the Nichols family's yard and "carried as well a pocket knife with which to carve them" into small baskets.<sup>64</sup> In her later years she kept working with her hands as she taught her grandchildren to do the same. "She could correct a nail that bent the wrong way as she was hammering it," remembered her grandson Charles Lowell, "a skill I now have."<sup>65</sup>

Nichols' philosophy of the value of hard work extended well beyond her personal and professional time. She also utilized her skills and love for hand work in her philanthropy and activism. In 1944 she volunteered for a Red Cross program called "Arts and Skills Workers"<sup>66</sup> where volunteers taught handcrafts to wounded World War II veterans in hospitals. Nichols' list of models that she brought to the Waltham Hospital on October 16, 1944 included "book stand, letter rack (cherry), small shelf scalloped sides, match box holder" and "cigarette dispenser gadget."<sup>67</sup> She taught those values to her children and grandchildren as well. Her grandson, Arthur Shurcliff, remembers her carpentry practice as,

...a social and a functional activity, with the emphasis on social...I recall her collecting used orange crates, and supervising us as we made "blocks" for playing, and put them in the orange crates, so they could be given to children whose parents could not afford blocks.

Nichols' work, from Ellis Memorial and the Red Cross, to teaching young girls how to build furniture and making toys for underprivileged families with her grandchildren, represents a



Nichols' plan for a cabinet, "cabinet / scale 1/8[inches]=1[inches]."

desire to affect social change through hand making. "Craftivism," a term coined by writer and self-described "craftivist," Betsy Greer,<sup>68</sup> is a blend of craft practice and activism that is often identified chronologically with second wave feminism.<sup>69</sup> Communal knitting and quilting projects in the second half of the twentieth century included the 1987 AIDS Memorial Quilt,<sup>70</sup> and the work of Canadian group, "Voice of Women" (VOW) to protest the Vietnam War in 1961 by knitting camouflage garments for children and sending them to civilian families.<sup>71</sup> These projects and many others like them raised awareness for social and political issues and gave women a voice through materials normally associated with domestic limitations. Greer suggests that artistic practices that promote change "give other craftivists permission to make boldly, make with the greater good in mind, and make in order to nourish ourselves"<sup>72</sup> and that is exactly what Nichols' practice did. Her work and personal desire to push the boundaries of gendered materials; her role as a teacher to underprivileged children and young women; her support of the professional endeavors of other female artisans—secures deeper roots for the force behind craftivism.

Right: Nichols with her handmade cabinet, n.d.



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## **ILLUSTRATIONS**

pp.12, 13, 18, 19, 23 (left), 26, 28 (right), 29, 30, 31 Additional papers of the Nichols-Shurtleff family, 1758-2006 (inclusive), 1880-1960 (bulk), Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University; p.14 Nichols family photograph collection, Nichols House Museum; p.15 North Bennet Street Industrial School Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University; p.16 Gustaf Larsson, *American Sloyd* ([Boston, 1900]); pp. 20, 24 Courtesy Shurcliff family; p.21 Courtesy Ross Harris; pp.22, 23 (right) Courtesy Charles Lowell; p.24 (bottom) Nichols House Museum Permanent Collection; p.25 Courtesy Arthur Shurcliff; p.27 (left) Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, p.27 (right) The Cloisters Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; p.28 (left) Nichols Family Papers, Nichols House Museum.



# ***CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTE***

Lydia See

Exhibition photographer, Lydia See is a multidisciplinary practitioner, educator and curator of art and archives. She is currently the Artist in Residence at the Spartanburg County Public Libraries in partnership with HUB-BUB.

The Nichols House Museum is decidedly not a “white cube” and should not be treated as such, so the approach to the documentation of this exhibition, made using available light and without moving objects or furniture from the permanent collection, is intended to honor the entirely unique experience of visiting the Nichols House Museum. Here is a tangible record of many lives - the house is not merely a repository for objects and artifacts belonging to the Nichols family, but is imbued with the identity the family members and household staff, each with their own legacy, as well as the legacy of those who have visited, the museum staff, the curator of this exhibition and its contributing artists.

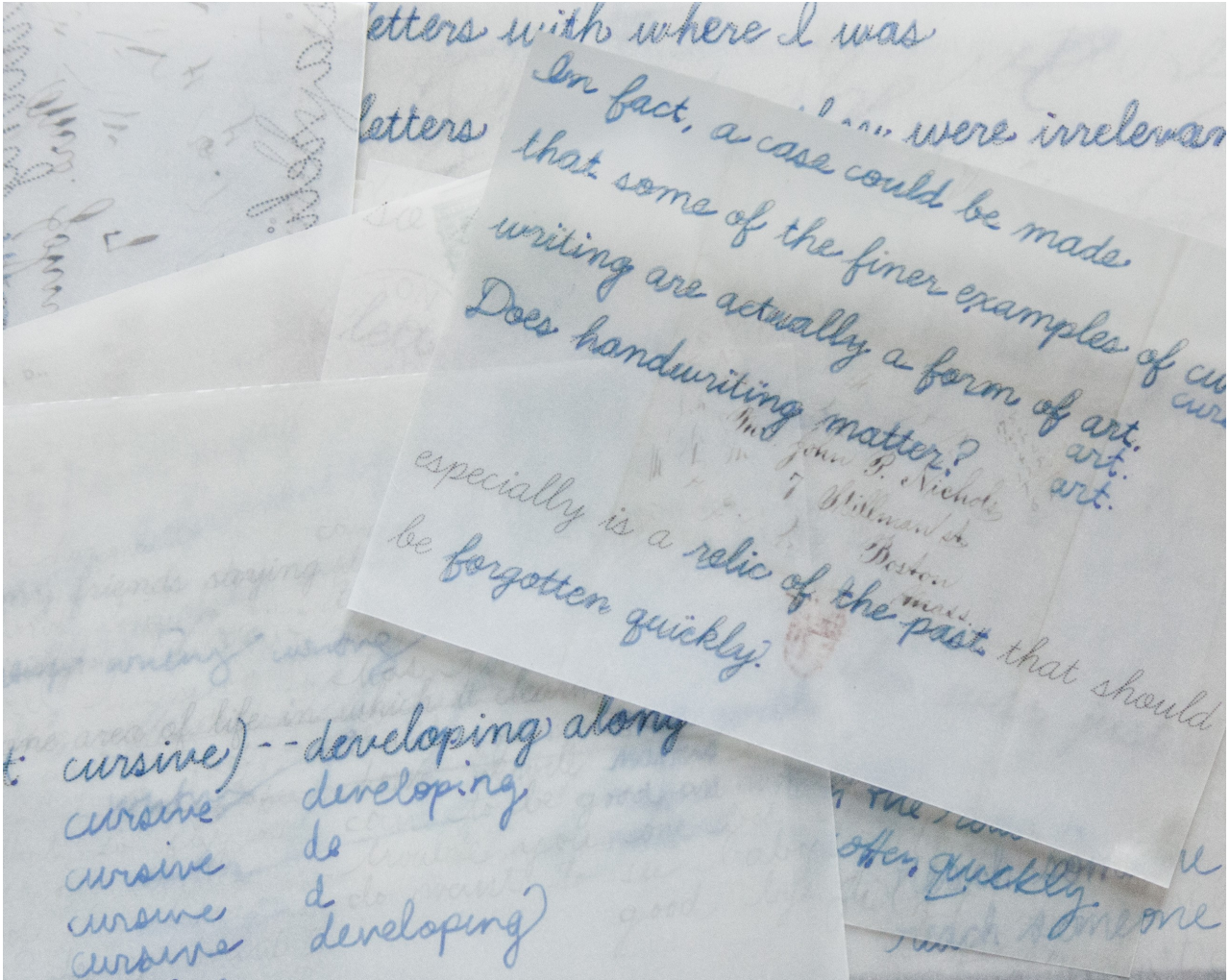
Documentation can be a testimony, an act of resistance and a record of “fact.” Photography is a powerful tool for examination of collective memory, while simultaneously rewriting perception. It is the responsibility of artists as well as historians and curators, to extend our greater understanding of identity and perception by creating environments of collective context. It is not

simply the role of makers to create and documentarians to record, but rather it is in the weaving together of these disciplines which initiates a more complex and nuanced dialog.

In order to build on that dialog, I have combined material from the Nichols’ archives with contemporary commentary on the state of penmanship and handwritten letters. These “Correspondences” urge the viewer to consider their own associations with handwriting and the mail, while placing penmanship and its applications within contemporary and historic contexts of craft.

The works were made using excerpts from letters written to and from Nichols family members, with cursive letter formation text, generated from randomized online articles on handwriting and letter writing combined with memories of receiving and writing letters, hand-traced with a fountain pen. These works are situated within handmade letter holders that are attributed to Margaret Homer (Nichols) Shurcliff and her woodworking students.

Left: *Correspondences*, vellum and ink, dimensions variable.



OPERA  
CARLYLE  
IV  
K.H.R.  
SONGS OF FAIRY LAND  
Spartan  
YRIS

THE POEMS OF  
GAIUS TRUMBULL  
BALL STICKNER  
THE GREEK POETS  
J.A. STUBBS  
VOL. I  
HARPER  
THE GREEK POETS  
J.A. STUBBS  
VOL. II  
HARPER  
SEVEN AMERICAN CLASSICS

In fact, a case could be made  
that some of the finer  
writing are actually  
Does handwriting  
especially is  
be forgotten

GLISH BIBLE  
OF LONDON  
NG THE SCOTS  
S IN BRITAIN  
NAINNEERS  
LONDONER  
AND CANALS  
CLISH CLUBS  
TURE-MAKERS  
H NOVELISTS  
OF COMMONS  
VERS IN BRITAIN  
MAP-MAKERS  
S & SMALL TOWNS  
THE ENGLISH  
ISH STEAMEN  
& REFORMERS  
R. & TRADITIONAL ART  
ISH FARMING  
A  
Precious  
Heritage  
Caroline  
Hazard  
MER  
ERA  
The Park  
The Days





# **CHELSEA REVELLE**

*Marian, Elizabeth, Rose and Margaret*, digitally printed fabric, embroidery thread, (3) 9.5"×12.5".

Revelle's work examines themes of the home and domestic female, exploring the link between one's identity and sacrifice of individualism. Portraiture was a popular photographic theme in the 1800-1900's as well as embroidery which was the basis of inspiration for honoring the women in the Nichols family: Elizabeth, Rose, Marian and Margaret.

Photos of the women were researched from the Nichols family archives and superimposed with popular wallpaper patterns from the early 1900's and printed directly onto fabric. Garden design and horticulture were a large part of the women's lives, depicted here in the photographs and surrounding embroidered foliage that aim to represent 'growth' for their interest and involvement in women's rights and improved status of women and the working class. This is in contrast to the conventional ideals of domestic tasks and the act of embroidering which ensured women were kept confined to the home, associating them

with docility, obedience and meekness.

Since the Nichols women defied society's standards, demonstrating independence as social activists, these portraits give them a new voice, valuing them for their own personalities, talents and endeavors aside from the traditional limitations of the domestic sphere. Rose in particular proved that an educated, intellectual young woman who valued self fulfillment could be of service to her community and engage in activities that did not rely on a man's approval or dependent on a husband's achievements and economic status. To seek intellectual and literary pursuits during this time period was a very risky endeavor. Women who stepped outside of this narrow province or who attempted traditionally masculine activities were often in danger of being labeled insane. These pieces are symbols of encouragement for women both past and present and who nevertheless, persisted.







# ***CARLIE WAGANER***

*The Nichols Sisters: Rose, Marian and Margaret, cotton yarn, poly-fil fiber, plastic beads, (3) 17"x17"x8"*

The pillows were all created from a singular warp, representative of the Nichols family lineage. The light pink cotton warp signifies the underlying femininity of the three Nichols sisters that they were able to maintain without compromising their independence. The weft for each pillow is different based on the woman it represents: Rose's weft is red as she the eldest, the most strong-willed and the most directly connected to the house. Marian's weft is yellow because of her intelligence, energy and perseverance in public service, even after she lost her campaign for state legislature. Margaret's weft is green based on her love of the outdoors and sportsmanship. As the only sister who married and had children, Margaret's green weft also stands for fertility.

Each pillow exhibits a different pattern in a sequence; though the warp remains constant, slight changes in the pattern create a completely different appearance to communicate the unique

identity of each sister, despite their family ties.

Rose, Marian, and Margaret were three influential and independent thinkers. Each sister pursued her interests during a time that society was not yet ready to listen to the strength of female thinking. They used their privilege as a platform to affect social change in their respective fields and interests. Though the acts of defiance were small in comparison to larger movements at the time, even the smallest opposition can create change. While the pillows display traditionally beautiful and soft overshot patterns on the exterior, the interiors hold considerable weight. This weight serves to personify the pillows and give a physical presence of the sisters in the room, serving as a metaphor for the influence their choices held in society. Museum visitors are invited to sit with, touch and hold the pillows to feel that weight and acknowledge their own weight and ability to enact change.









# **JASMINE BAETZ**

*In Their Hands*, stoneware, installation size 70"x52"x8"

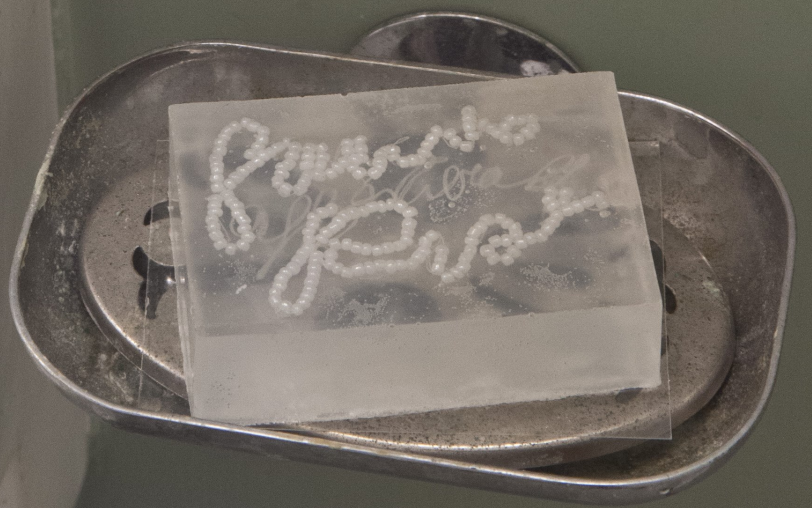
At the dining room table sit four place settings to look upon. Each setting is an assemblage, a cluster, a collage, a muddy mixture of components that visibly connects this table with the less-often-named figures in the Nichols' story. When she was growing up in India, my grandmother had a series of servants, and I never could learn their names or stories. "The ayah" or "my ayah" had voice only through her presence as a secondary character in the life of my grandmother. These objects are for the ayah, the servant, the worker, in any household, and especially the Nichols' home.

As visitors in the year 2017, we can stand around the Nichols' dining table and look at these mementos to the servant class. This stance pro-

vides us with an empathic vantage point from which we can consider the people who saw to the needs of the family as they ate and went about their days: hovering, anticipating, tending, serving. Looking back on the writings between family members about their various servants, there is plenty of the mundane, plenty of appreciation, plenty of deprecation and cold evaluation. It is far too easy to point to the latter statements and scoff with righteous indignation, and it is also too easy to dismiss them as contextualized peculiarities of the past. My effort here is to find a way to keep this past present in mind, with a bit of dredging, a bit of lightness, and a refusal to forget our human tendency to hold oneself above another.







# ***BETSE FRAIL***

*Yours Affectionately*, glycerin, thread, beads, (74) 2.25"x3.25"x.75".

My desire to transform embroidered text into objects rather than flat sampler-like works, in a way that felt impermanent, led to my work with glycerin. While the words I stitched were borrowed, I have analyzed them to a point where they feel like they are my own. The two most common reactions I have seen in response to these pieces are wonderment at the craft and frustration in not being able to read the text. When the dry pieces sit out in open-air, the glycerin becomes cloudy, but when wet, the lack of clarity dissolves and the text grows more legible. With each wash, the words grow clearer and clearer until a bit of the thread breaks through the surface. Without the glycerin to hold it, the thread goes limp and loses its form as a word or letter. The viewer, once on the brink of exposing the truths hidden inside the soap bar, is left filling in blanks and losing the text all together. Thus,

my relationships and conversations are not with the audience, they are with the soap.

What is compelling about placing these pieces in The Nichols House Museum, a historical home, is the concept of speculation. Though I was provided with a generous amount of both primary and secondary sources so that I might get to know and understand the Nichols sisters and their relationships to one another, I've found that even these trusted sources cannot always explain the entire truth. There are inevitably blanks asking to be filled in. My intent is to borrow the words of Rose Standish Nichols to fuel both an analysis and a dialogue surrounding family dynamics, sisterhood, femininity and radicalism. Visitors will be able to wash their hands with the work and to attempt to read the narrative concealed in the glycerin.





# ***ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES***

JASMINE BAETZ is an artist, student and teacher living in Boston. She earned her BFA at Massachusetts College of Art and Design where she studied Ceramics. She uses clay to investigate history, repetition, belief and identity.

BETSE FRAIL is a fiber artist based in Boston. She studied Fibers at Massachusetts College of Art and Design where she earned her BFA. While her medium of choice is embroidery, she has also worked in other craft and sewing practices as well as illustration and ceramics. She has worked under public sculptor Janet Echelman and interned at the Boston Ballet Costume Shop. Her work has been exhibited both locally and internationally.

CHELSEA REVELLE is a Boston-based fine artist exploring assemblage, mixed media, printmaking, and fiber art. Revelle received her BFA from Massachusetts College of Art and Design in 2007. Life in the city inspired Revelle to invest her time in community arts-based education. She achieved her Masters in Organizational Leadership from Wheelock College in 2012 and is currently the Manager of Studio Art Classes at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

CARLIE WAGANER is a student at Massachusetts College of Art and Design where she studies Fibers. Her studio practice takes material root in crochet, fabric manipulation and weaving. She employs elements of science and biology into the process and materialization of her work. Previous showings include *Biological* (Godine Family Gallery, MassArt 2016), *Tongue Tied* (Student Life Gallery, MassArt 2016), and the *Fibers All School Show* (Presidents Gallery, MassArt 2017).



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*Victoria McKay and Emma Welty*

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Front cover image: Margaret Homer (Nichols) Shurcliff, ca. 1905, courtesy Shurcliff family.

Back cover image: Sketch from Rose Standish Nichols' sketchbook, 1899, inscribed "sketches for etchings," Nichols Family Papers.

Curator and writer Emma Welty is the Head of Collections and Education at the Nichols House Museum. Also an art maker, she works primarily in textile practices.

The Nichols House Museum is a private, nonprofit 501(C)3 corporation with the following mission:

The Nichols House Museum preserves and interprets the 1804 Federal townhouse that was home to landscape gardener, suffragist and pacifist Rose Standish Nichols and her family. Their home and its original art and furnishings provide a glimpse into life on historic Beacon Hill from the mid-19th to mid-20th century. The museum educates and inspires the public through innovative programs, and it continues the conversation on the social concerns the Nichols family embraced that are still relevant today.





