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# The Secret Life of Karl Kipp

## *A Collector Traces the Surprising Origins of Roycroft's Master Metalworker*

By David Kornacki

As a collector, I've long been fascinated by Karl Kipp (1881-1954), who created some of the most sought-after metalwork of the Arts and Crafts movement. Notable for iconic design and exemplary craftsmanship, examples of Kipp's work—whether crafted at Elbert Hubbard's Roycroft community or at Kipp's own Tookay Shop—are prized by major museums and private collectors.

Kipp's biographies typically begin along these lines: "Karl Kipp, a former banker, worked with Roycroft designer Dard Hunter on the first copper items produced at Roycroft, and by 1909 had become manager of the rapidly growing Roycroft Copper Shop." Kipp's early life and training, if mentioned at all, are the subject of speculation. In 2007, however, a lucky eBay find—a "wanted" poster—sent me down a path that now allows us to fill in the sizable blanks in the life of Karl Kipp. This rare and unexpected piece of ephemera opened the door to the improbable chain of events that transported Kipp from small town bank clerk, to head of the Roycroft's metalware operation, to industrial designer and beyond.

*Above left* This stein of copper, German silver and jade, made by Karl Kipp at the Roycroft Shops circa 1910, reveals the influence of Viennese designers such as Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser. *Image from Style 1900 archives.*

*Above right* Designed by Karl Kipp, this copper humidifier with applied German silver details, made at the Roycroft circa 1910-1912, also exhibits a Viennese influence. *Image from Style 1900 archives.*

## Karl Kipp, Embezzler

Karl Kipp was born near Saratoga Springs, New York, in 1881, the son of the Superintendent of Charlton Industrial Farm School, "A Christian Family Home for Wayward or Homeless Boys."<sup>1</sup> In 1902, at the age of 21, Kipp took a job at the First National Bank of Saratoga Springs as a cashier, clerk, or bookkeeper.<sup>2</sup>

Kipp, however, was engaged in more than routine bookkeeping. After he failed to return from a scheduled vacation in January, 1904, a review of his ledgers revealed that he had "opened a fictitious account with a certain man as executor, and credited large sums to his account: that he drew checks signed by the executor's name: that they were cashed at other banks, and that Kipp benefited to the amount of \$6,000 before his scheme was discovered."<sup>3</sup> In fact, the stolen funds totaled \$6,428—roughly \$150,000 today.<sup>4</sup>

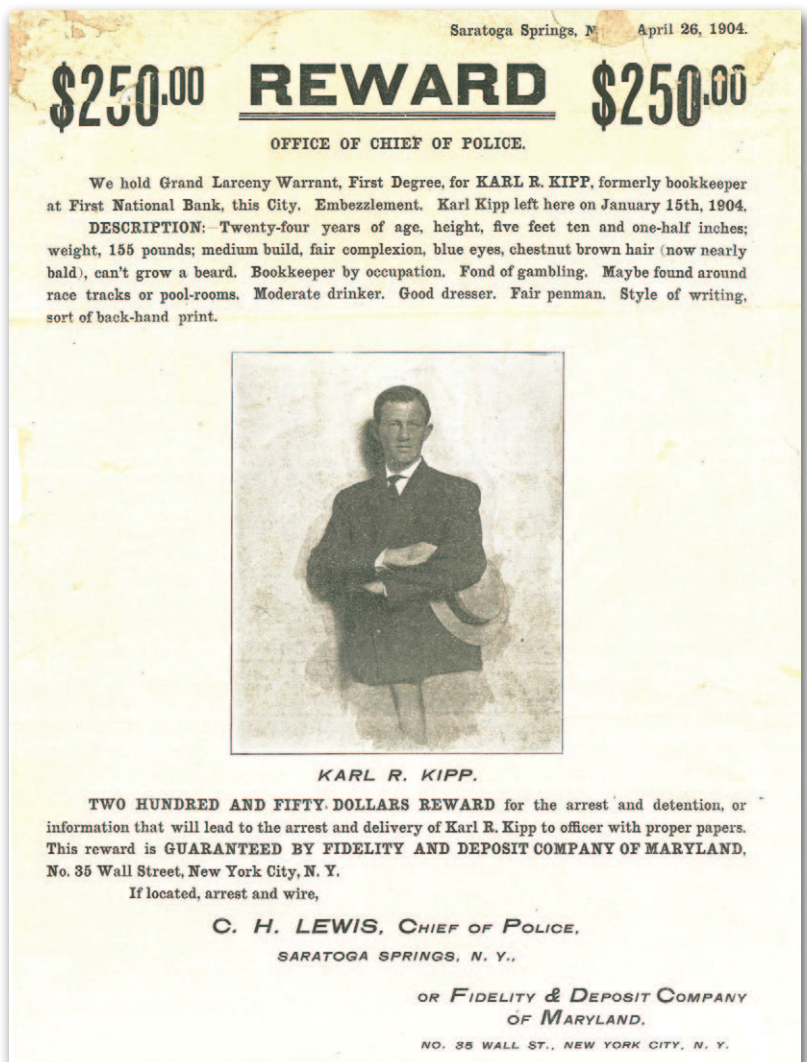
A warrant for Kipp's arrest on the charge of Grand Larceny was issued in April, 1904.<sup>5</sup> The wanted poster with a \$250 reward included a compelling personal description:

*Twenty four years of age, height, five feet ten and one-half inches; weight, 155 pounds; medium build, fair complexion, blue eyes, chestnut brown hair (now nearly bald), can't grow a beard. Bookkeeper by occupation. Fond of gambling. Maybe found around race tracks or pool-rooms. Moderate drinker. Good dresser. Fair penman. Style of writing, sort of back-hand print.*

In October of 1904, Kipp registered as a "travelling man" at a hotel in St. Paul, Minnesota.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately for Karl, copies of his wanted poster had already reached St. Paul, attracting the attention of a local detective who arrested him on October 23.<sup>7</sup> Newspaper accounts of Kipp's ten months on the lam reported that he traveled to Europe, landing in Monte Carlo where one source

**Top right** The popular Princess Candlestick (right) was produced at Kipp's Tookay Shop and later at the Roycroft Copper Shop. The candlestick at left was a design only produced at the Tookay Shop. *Image from Style 1900 archives.*

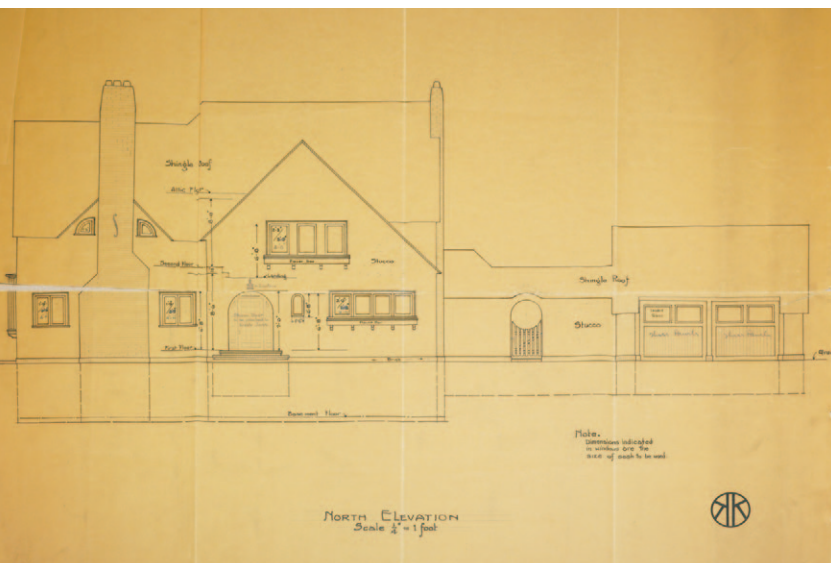
**Bottom right** This wanted poster for Karl Kipp was issued in 1904 after he embezzled over \$6,000 from the First National Bank of Saratoga Springs. It was discovered on eBay in 2007.







The National Archives, Southeast Region, Atlanta, GA.



Style 1900 archives.

indicates that he “added to his wealth,” presumably through gambling.<sup>8</sup> He was also “heard from at the New Orleans races,” and “made a long stay in the wilds” of Manitoba.<sup>9</sup>

On December 9, Kipp pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court to the offense of “making a fictitious and false entry in a certain book of the First National Bank of Saratoga Springs and willfully misapplying and converting to his own use certain funds of said bank.”<sup>10</sup> He was sentenced to a term of five years and sent immediately to Clinton Prison in Dannemora, New York.<sup>11</sup>

## Karl Kipp, Prison Inmate

Two years into his sentence, Kipp was transferred to the United States Penitentiary in Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>12</sup> Within a week of his arrival, Kipp’s father sent a letter to the Warden inquiring whether his son could continue a correspondence course in architecture that he had begun while in Clinton. Several additional letters were sent to Atlanta from the International Correspondence Schools of Scranton, Pennsylvania, regarding Kipp’s enrollment in their Complete Architectural Course, confirming his status as a graduate of their Mechanical Drawing Course, and remarking that he had taken third prize in architectural drawing in competition

with experienced architects. Kipp himself wrote to the Warden, indicating that he took up the course in architecture “after and not before I got into this trouble” and that “the drawings for the competition were made while I was a federal prisoner at Clinton Prison.”

In January, 1907, the Warden gave approval, and Kipp began to receive shipments of materials including a T-square, a drawing board, drawing paper, and envelopes, along with books on house planning, bungalows and country residences, masonry and stone cutting, architectural perspectives, and art education.

Interestingly, Kipp put his talents as a draftsman to use while in the Atlanta facility. He had been caught “giving away groceries from the store” not long after his arrival at Clinton, resulting in the loss of 10 days “good time.” Kipp endeavored to have these days restored by appealing to the Superintendent of Prisons at the Department of Justice, and the Warden at Atlanta offered the following in support of Kipp in May 1908:

*...this convict has been here since November 28, 1906 and during this time his conduct has been correct in every particular... His work has been principally in the stonecutting shed, where he has rendered valuable service as a draughtsman and discovered several discrepancies in the plans which, if not discovered, would have caused considerable loss in stone.*

Although there was apparently no correspondence between Kipp and the Roycroft during his confinement, there are records of multiple letters to and from *The Craftsman*, the magazine published by visionary furniture manufacturer Gustav Stickley. Kipp wrote to *The Craftsman* in July of 1907 and during that year he received four letters from the magazine, including one from Stickley himself. Three more *Craftsman* letters were received in 1908. The content of these letters is not recorded, but it is fascinating to consider that at this very time, Victor Toothaker, who would later work closely with Kipp at the Roycroft Copper Shop, was managing Stickley’s metalworking operations and drawing architectural renderings of Craftsman homes.

Karl Kipp was discharged from the Atlanta penitentiary in August, 1908, after serving a commuted sentence of 3 years, 8 months and one week. He left prison with a train ticket to Ballston, NY, a new set of clothes, and an education in art and architecture that would have an enduring impact on his future.

## Karl Kipp, Craftsman

Exactly how Kipp obtained employment at the Roycroft community in East Aurora, New York is not known, but Elbert Hubbard had already been known to hire former prisoners. In 1901, he published an endorsement of prison reform in *The Philistine*, declaring that he could take “25 Sing Sing men, and by the kindergarten method manage them in a room alone day after day without arms or guards – teaching them to express themselves in useful work, making things with their hands.”<sup>13</sup> He was also described as a “pioneer in employing members of the ‘Ancient and Honorable Order of Grey Brothers’ – discharged prisoners,” based on his principle that “we find on acquaintance that the man in a striped suit is very much like ourselves; he had done something while we have only thought of it.”<sup>14</sup> And an early Hubbard biography relates this amusing anecdote:

*Knowing that Elbert Hubbard employed ex-prisoners, visitors tried their best to guess which ones; a bit bored with this, a half dozen of the younger men in the composing room, on an agreed-upon night, shaved their heads. The next morning, visitors encountering one of them felt they had solved the problem. . . until they discovered another, another, and still another with a prisoner's shaved head.*<sup>15</sup>

Kipp recalled that he began at the Roycroft in 1908, working first in the bindery before being “offered the opportunity of finishing some creative work begun by another employee, and thus became interested in designing.”<sup>16</sup> That other employee was most likely Dard Hunter, who at that time was engaged in designing and crafting lighting, stained glass and metalwork for the Roycroft campus buildings.

**Opposite top** In November 1906, Karl Kipp was transferred to the United States Penitentiary in Atlanta and became inmate 1465.

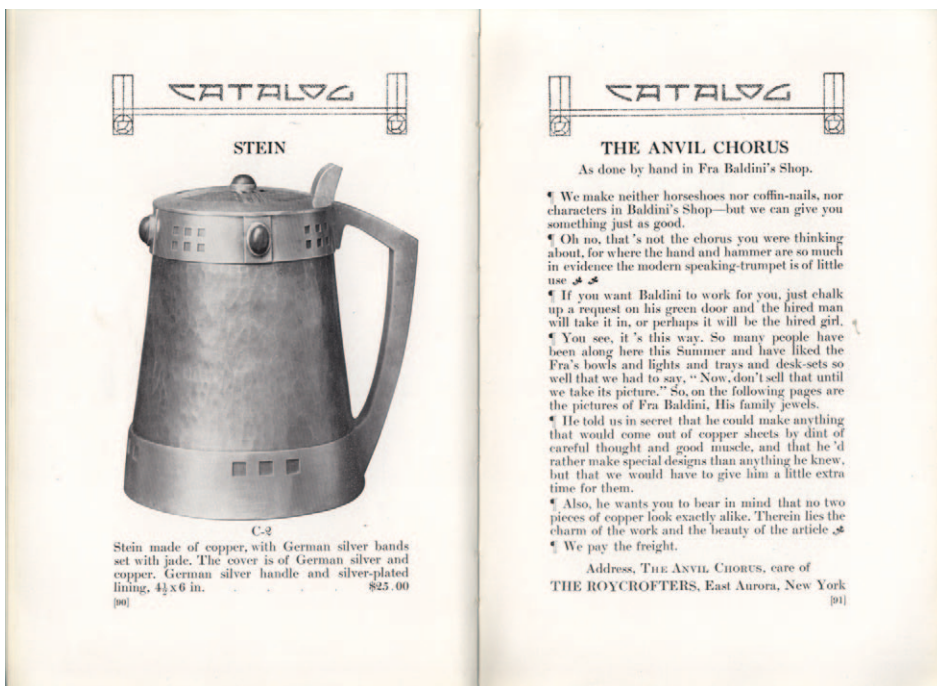
**Opposite bottom** Skills Kipp developed while in prison through a correspondence course in architecture would later allow him to produce this elevation drawing for his East Aurora residence, built in 1925.

**Left** One of the earliest pieces of Kipp's metalwork at Roycroft, a copper and German silver jardinière, bears this rare mark that incorporates his initials and Roycroft's orb and cross mark within a box.

**Below left** A 1910 catalog advertisement for the Roycroft stein pictured on page 56 is accompanied by a rather poetic description of “Fra Baldini's Shop,” a clear reference to Kipp and his role.

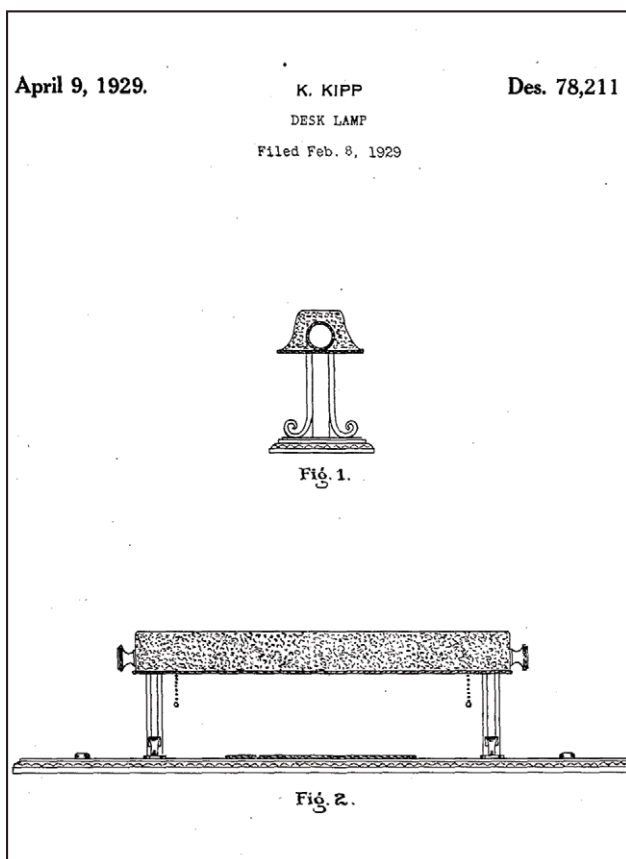
**Below** In this candlestick designed around 1910, Kipp combined simple geometric elements into a dramatic modern form.

Photograph by Robert Rust.



Style 1900 archives.





Aside from his work for Roycroft, Hunter had also established the Dard Hunter School of Handicraft around 1909, where he taught metalwork and jewelry design. Kipp's obituary indicates that he was a graduate of "the Roycroft Craft School"—probably a reference to Hunter's school.<sup>17</sup> As advertisements for the school stated, Hunter had "worked in the leading art shops of Vienna, Munich, and Darmstadt."<sup>18</sup> As a result, his Roycroft designs became heavily influenced by men such as the Wiener Werkstätte's Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser, whose work was also published in periodicals available at the Roycroft library.<sup>19</sup>

By 1910, Kipp was firmly established as the driving force behind the new Roycroft Copper Shop, where he personally designed and crafted some of the Shop's most significant objects.<sup>20</sup> Incorporating many of the new European design elements recently embraced by Dard Hunter—simple architectural forms, geometric cutouts, and restrained decoration—these pieces helped introduce early modernist designs to American craft.

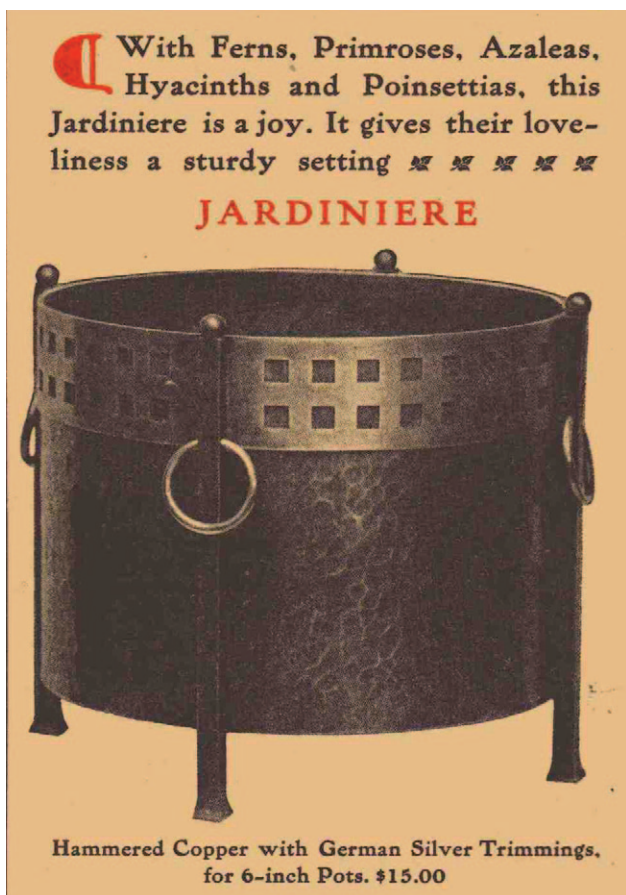
Despite his artistic and commercial success at Roycroft, Kipp apparently began to take steps toward establishing his own firm in late 1911 or early 1912. By March 1912, ads began to appear in magazines for hammered copper products "Made by Karl Kipp at The Tookay Shop in East Aurora, New York" (the shop's name was based on his initials).<sup>21</sup> At the same time, ads for the Dard Hunter School listed both Hunter and Kipp as instructors, indicating that Kipp was now involved in two new enterprises.<sup>22</sup>

The Tookay Shop remained in operation for three years. Shortly after Elbert Hubbard perished on the *Lusitania* in May 1915, Kipp was persuaded by Hubbard's son Bert to rejoin the Roycroft Copper Shop.<sup>23</sup> Roycroft copperware production had continued in Kipp's absence under Victor Toothaker, who was able to expand production while also fulfilling large commissions such as the lighting and metalwork for the Grove Park Inn in Asheville, North Carolina. With Kipp and his Tookay workers back on board, Roycroft boasted sufficient design, management and production talent to operate successfully through the end of the 1920s.

Kipp resigned from the Roycroft in May 1929 after rejecting an offer from Bert Hubbard to purchase the Copper Shop.<sup>24</sup> In the early 1930s he opened a business in East Aurora, the Karl Kipp Shops, to produce fine pewter plates, bowls, cups, vases, trays and candleholders generally in an Art Deco style.<sup>25</sup> These products were to a large extent machine-made through the metal-spinning process and did not entail hand-hammering like Kipp's earlier Arts and Crafts output.

**Top left** In April 1929, Karl Kipp received a patent for this desk lamp design, the only patent issued for a piece of Roycroft metalwork.

**Bottom left** An example of this Roycroft jardinière by Karl Kipp circa 1910 is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This advertisement ran in *The Fra* magazine in January 1911.



## Karl Kipp, Industrial Designer

In mid-1935, Kipp submitted two patent applications for metal furniture designs.<sup>26</sup> Soon after, he moved 50 miles south to Olean, New York, and started work at the Daystrom Corporation, a major furniture manufacturer.<sup>27</sup> Thus began a new career phase, one focused solely on furniture design at a large corporation. Kipp's patents for Daystrom during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s include those for stools, kitchen chairs, smoking stands, and a towel rack.<sup>28</sup> Daystrom advertisements, such as this ad copy for a dinette set from 1954, even referred to Kipp by name:



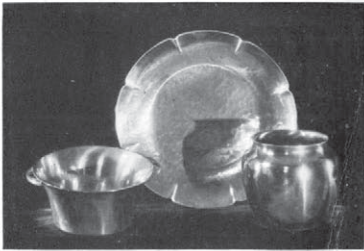
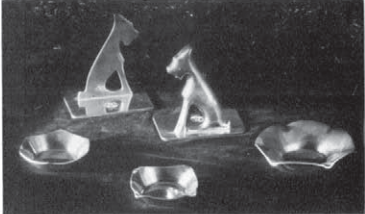

*Graceful lines and airy openness of this creation by noted stylist Karl Kipp give your kitchen a new, spacious look. Many decorators also use it in living room, dinette or terrace. Sparkling Daystrom chrome, with Daystromite Wonder Top in wood-grained gray, chartreuse, yellow, limed oak, honey-wood. Foam-rubber comfort-cushions covered in selection of wipe-clean fabrics and colors.*<sup>29</sup>

Kipp reached the level of Secretary and Director of Design and Development Engineering at Daystrom, represented the

**Right** Examples of the pewter items produced at the Karl Kipp Shops during the early 1930s. *Image from Style 1900 archives.*

**Below** A catalogue page shows some of the pewter objects made at the Karl Kipp Shops in the early 1930s. These products were spun smooth with a polished finish, and therefore lacked the hammer marks commonly associated with Kipp's Arts and Crafts period metalwork.



KARL KIPP	PEWTER	PEWTER
 <p>OFFERINGS of PEWTER which possess Distinctive Personality for Gift Occasions &amp; Every-day Living</p>	 <p>No. 201 Vase, 3 3/4" high . . . . . \$4.50 No. 813 Bread and Butter Plate, 5 1/2" dia. . . . . 3.50 No. 826 Bon Bon or Nut Bowl, 5 1/2" dia. . . . . 4.00 No. 202 Vase, 3 3/4" high . . . . . 4.50</p>  <p>No. 825 Ice Bowl, 6 1/2" dia. . . . . \$9.00 No. 824 Sandwich Plate, 9 3/4" dia. . . . . 10.00 No. 203 Flower Bowl, 4 1/4" high . . . . . 7.50</p>	 <p>No. 616 Ash Tray, Hexagonal, 3" dia. . . . . \$1.50 No. 614 Ash Tray, square, 3" dia. . . . . 1.50 No. 303 Book Ends, Solid Pewter, 4 1/4" high . . . . . 7.50 No. 612 Ash Tray, 4 1/2" dia. . . . . 2.50</p>  <p>No. 821 Creamer, Sugar and Tray . . . . . 15.00 No. 820 Chop Plate, 14 1/2" dia. . . . . \$18.00 No. 822 Pitcher, 2 1/2" pt. . . . . 18.00</p>
THE KARL KIPP SHOPS	OUR PEWTER IS OF THE FINEST ALLOY AND DOES NOT TARNISH. WASHING IN HOT SOAP AND WATER KEEPS IT BRIGHT INDEFINITELY. POLISH WITH CANTON FLANNEL.	



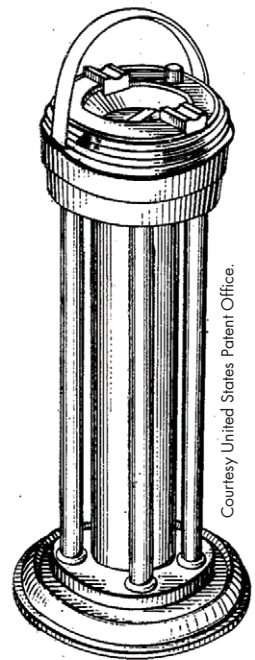


### Cheerful as a chuckle

is this new dinette set that makes mealtime a gay adventure.

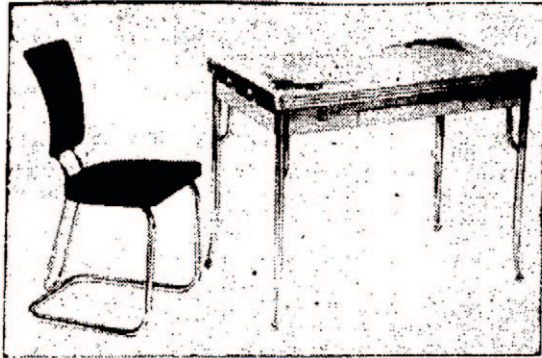
The graceful oval table has a handy center extension that zips smoothly out when you need more elbow room.

The shining table top is Daystrom's own unique plastic—won't char or chip or stain. Not even a steaming casserole can mar that bright surface! And so easy to keep clean—a swish of a damp cloth does the trick! With sturdy chairs cushioned in washable plastic upholstery.



Courtesy United States Patent Office.

## New Table Tops In '47 Daystrom Sets



NewsPaperArchive.com

*Above left* This dinette set from the mid 1950s is typical of the design work that Karl Kipp did at Daystrom Corporation from 1935 until his death in 1954.

*Above right* By April 1937, Kipp had begun submitting patent applications for Daystrom furniture designs, including one for this smoking stand—a design astonishingly reminiscent of the Roycroft silver and copper candlestick (page 59) he had crafted over 25 years before.

*Left* The 65 year-old Kipp is featured here in a 1946 news article about his latest chrome and laminated plastic kitchen furniture designs for Daystrom.



company at trade shows nationwide, and became a pillar of the Olean community—a member of the Rotary Club, a trustee of the public library, a patron of the symphony orchestra, and a committee chairman of the Olean Miniature Camera Club.<sup>30</sup>

After his death in Olean in 1954 at the age of 72, the local paper stated that “Mr. Kipp was one of the country’s leading designers of kitchen and dinette furniture... responsible for many of the design changes which brought chrome and steel furniture to its present peak of popularity.” The piece briefly cited Kipp’s association with Elbert Hubbard, but made no mention of his life prior to the Roycroft.<sup>31</sup> The *New York Times* noted merely that Kipp was “a leading designer of kitchen and dinette furniture...one of the first to introduce chrome and steel sets.”<sup>32</sup> For the most part, it seems, Kipp’s accomplishments during the height of the Arts and Crafts movement had largely been forgotten by the time of his death.

## Epilogue

In 2003, before most details of Kipp’s pre- and post-Roycroft career had come to light, Doug McFarland, Roycroft collector and co-curator of the Elbert Hubbard Roycroft Museum, mentioned seeing an obituary that stated Kipp had died in Olean in 1954. Doug resolved to visit the town, seek out the burial site, and perhaps take a photo.

During his first trip to Olean, Doug located the funeral home mentioned in period accounts and explained his quest. The funeral director consulted fifty-year-old files and informed him that in a few weeks, he would have what Doug was seeking. On a second visit, Doug duly presented himself at the home. After a short wait, the funeral director came up from the basement holding a package wrapped in brown butcher paper and bound with twine. “What is this?” asked Doug. “It’s Karl Kipp, of course!” exclaimed the gentleman. “He was never claimed.”

Upon his death, Kipp’s remains were sent to Buffalo for cremation, then returned to the funeral home in Olean. There they sat until Doug took them back to East Aurora and turned them over to Kipp’s local descendents. To this day, Doug enjoys retelling the story of how he went to Olean to photograph Kipp’s headstone, but ended up driving home with Karl Kipp himself!

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Collector **David Kornacki** writes and lectures about Roycroft metalwork, speaking most recently on “The History of the Roycroft Copper Shop” at the 2009 Grove Park Inn Arts and Crafts Conference. In 1999, he created [www.roycroftcopper.com](http://www.roycroftcopper.com), the only Internet site devoted exclusively to the topic. He is grateful to his brother Jon Kornacki and to his friend Doug McFarland for their assistance with this article, and extends special thanks to Robert Rust, Roycroft collector and scholar, for his invaluable contributions.

## To Learn More

### BOOKS

*Head, Heart and Hand, Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters*, edited by Marie Via and Marjorie Searl (University of Rochester Press, 1994).

*The Official Price Guide to Arts and Crafts*, edited by Bruce Johnson (House of Collectibles, 1992).

Tookay Shop catalog reprints, 1912 and 1914 (Roycroft Arts Museum, East Aurora, NY, 1992).

### ON THE WEB

The Roycroft Copper Online Price Guide at the author’s website, [www.roycroftcopper.com](http://www.roycroftcopper.com), provides numerous photographs and descriptions of items made by Karl Kipp at Roycroft and at the Tookay Shop, and offers tips on identifying and pricing Kipp metalwork.

### MUSEUMS

#### The Roycroft Arts Museum

on the Roycroft Campus  
East Aurora, NY 14052  
716-763-3333

The Roycroft Arts Museum features the largest collection of Karl Kipp metalwork; open during the Roycroft Festival each June, or by appointment.

#### The Elbert Hubbard Roycroft Museum

363 Oakwood Ave  
East Aurora, NY 14052  
716-652-4735  
[www.roycrofter.com/museum.htm](http://www.roycrofter.com/museum.htm)  
(Open June 1 – Oct 31)

1 Prison file for Karl R. Kipp, Federal Archives, Southeast District, Atlanta Penitentiary.  
2 *The New York Times*, April 19, 1904; *The Post Standard*, Syracuse, NY, Oct 25 1904, Nov 3, 1904, Dec 12, 1904. 3 *Post Standard* Oct 7, 1904. 4 *New York Times*, April 19, 1904 (adjusted by Federal Reserve calculator at [www.minneapolisfed.org](http://www.minneapolisfed.org)).  
5 *New York Times* Oct 7, 1904. 6 *Post Standard* Oct 25, 1904. 7 *Post Standard* Nov 3, 1904. 8 *Daily Times*, New Brunswick, NJ, Dec 7, 1904. 9 *Post Standard*, Nov 3, 1904. 10 Prison file. 11 Prison file. 12 All details in this section are taken from Kipp’s prison file. 13 H. Kenneth and Ernest E. Simmons Dirlam and John Rae, *Sinners This is East Aurora* (Vantage Press, 1964), p. 139. 14 *Sinners*, pp. 170, 171. 15 *Sinners*, p. 217. 16 *Olean Times Herald*, Olean, NY, Dec 10, 1935. 17 Obituary, probably from *Olean Times Herald*, in Karl R. Kipp file, CHH Funeral Home, Olean, NY. 18 *The Craftsman*, October 1910, page x. 19 Marie Via and Marjorie Searl, ed., *Head, Heart and Hand, Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters* (University of Rochester Press, 1994), p. 91. 20 Roycroft’s 1910 catalog includes a reference to Kipp’s role – “Fra Baldini’s Shop.” 21 *House Beautiful*, March 1912, p. xi. 22 *The Craftsman*, March 1912, p. 8a. 23 *Head, Heart and Hand*, p. 85. 24 *Head, Heart and Hand*, p. 90. 25 *Olean Times Herald*, Dec 12, 1946. 26 US Design Patents #97,351 and #97,163. 27 The patents in note 26 list Kipp’s residence as East Aurora in July 1935; the *Olean Times Herald*, Sept 10, 1935, noted that Kipp was now a resident of Olean. 28 US Design Patents #174,695, #149,652, #151,272, #110,463, #110,464, #111,608, and US patent #2,502,857. 29 *Post Standard*, May 5, 1954. 30 *Olean Times Herald*, Dec 10, 1935, Feb 29, 1940, July 20, 1946, Jan 15, 1947. 31 Obituary, see note 17. 32 *New York Times*, May 11, 1954.