



AN EXOTIC JOURNEY
The Furniture & Paintings of
LOCKWOOD DE FOREST

January 27–March 13, 2015



Carved Teakwood Side Chair, circa 1885. Designed by Lockwood de Forest
Carved by the Ahmedabad Wood Carving Company, Ahmedabad, India
Assembled in New York, 34½ × 17¼ × 17¼ in.



Bank of the Nile Opposite Cairo, Egypt, 1879–86, oil on canvas, 30 × 48 in. Bears original frame designed by the artist



Ramesseum at Thebes, 1876, oil on canvas, 37 × 30 in.

LOCKWOOD DE FOREST (1850–1932) was still a teenager when he began an informal, but extended tutelage with his great-uncle, the celebrated landscape painter Frederic Church. In 1868/69, the de Forest and Church families traveled to Rome and Athens where the master and his protégé famously painted on the Acropolis, side by side, *en plein air*. De Forest continued as mentee in 1871, when he studied both painting and Islamic designs with Church in his Hudson, New York, studio and while Church's exotically appointed house, Olana, was being built. Later that year, de Forest painted with Church in the Catskill Mountains and in 1872, he rented space at the Tenth Street Studio Building, where Church was also a tenant.

The early lessons learned from Church sustained de Forest's style throughout his career as a painter. Like Church, the young artist favored observation over interpretation and the distant view over foreground details. Both artists adhered to the Ruskinian credo that Fine Art emanates from Nature and that the artist is the seeker of Truth.

At each destination throughout his well-traveled life, de Forest painted oil sketches as well as finished works. Even as he immersed himself in Middle Eastern and Indian decorative arts, he found time to document his surroundings. Like many late 19th- and early 20th-century painters, he worked on paper, which he subsequently adhered to canvas. This convenient and lightweight method allowed him to use time between appointments or while on the road to his best advantage. Throughout his career, De Forest recorded carefully selected scenes of Egypt, Tunisia, Greece, Syria, India, Mexico, Hawaii, Alaska, California, the Grand Canyon, the Adirondacks, and Niagara Falls.

De Forest composed each painting with deliberation, positioning his easel as though it was a portal opening onto his preferred perspective. His muted colors are a reflection of the arid subjects and may also suggest the limited colors of a smaller, traveler's palette. But the larger studio pictures also show a chromatic reserve that is in keeping with the Ruskinian search for veritas. De Forest's views are always at some distance, often punctuated with ancient ruins, and sometimes with street scenes that only rarely include local figures. Because he believed that art must fulfill some purpose, his landscapes were painted to capture his memories, to record a changing world, and to convey the beauty of foreign places to his patrons in the United States. In spite of his devotion to verisimilitude, many of his paintings, such as *Buraq, Syria* or *On the Nile Below Cairo* seem proto-modern in their elegance and simplicity.

As much as de Forest strove to capture the actuality of each view, he often seems to have been emotionally moved by what he saw. Works like *Himalayan Valley, Kashmir*, or the heraldic large-scale painting, *Ramesseum at Thebes*, show



Pyramid of Sakkara, 1878, oil on paper laid down on canvas, 8 7/8 × 12 1/2 in.

de Forest fully absorbed in the pictorial dramas he surveyed. These and many other paintings impart the atmosphere as much as the locale of the site.

De Forest achieved wide and consistent praise for his landscapes. With Church's support, in 1872, he exhibited two paintings at the National Academy of Design, where his works were included in other exhibitions during the 1870s. During the late 1870s and 1880s, he exhibited in New York at the Century Club and he joined the Salmagundi, a club for illustrators. He was elected a Full Academician at the National Academy of Design in 1898. Between 1905 and 1913, de Forest was given one-man exhibitions at the St. Botolph Club in Boston, The Art Guild of St. Paul, the John Herron Art Institute in Indianapolis, and the City Art Museum in St. Louis.

The current exhibition celebrates de Forest's experiences in Egypt, Syria, and India from 1876 to 1882. These productive furniture design and entrepreneurial years were also some of his most creative painting years. The Egyptian scenes of ruins at Philae, the pyramids of Sakkara and on the Nile, desert views of Buraq and Hijaneh in Syria, the Parthenon, and the ancient temple and mountains in India reveal that he was immersed in his surroundings and fascinated by foreign geographies and cultures. Each painting and furnishing is both a moment in de Forest's life and a glimpse of an era now vanished.

A true Renaissance man, he was a landscape painter, an entrepreneur, a furniture designer, an importer, an interior designer, and a world traveler. Propelled by dauntless optimism and a deep need to succeed, his works remain the best measure of the man.

DAPHNE ANDERSON DEEDS



Carved Teakwood Armchair, circa 1885
Designed by Lockwood de Forest
Carved by the Ahmedabad Wood Carving Company,
Ahmedabad, India. Assembled in New York
45½ × 26 × 25 in.



Cast Iron Fire Back Screen, 1884
Designed by Lockwood de Forest
Center panel 32¾ × 25½ in.;
Side panels each 32¾ × 13 in.

Opposite:
Asymmetrical Étagère, circa 1885–1895
Pierced carvings supplied by Lockwood de Forest
and carved by Ahmedabad Wood Carving Company,
Ahmedabad, India. Brackets and body probably
designed and assembled in New York, 70 × 38½ × 17 in.

LOCKWOOD DE FOREST was both a highly skilled and celebrated designer as well as curator of culture. A world traveler, he first visited India in 1881, where he quickly became enchanted with Saracenic architecture, its wood-carved ornamentation, and the traditional handicrafts that had become scarce under centuries of British influence. A Western-led movement to revive East Indian arts was quietly growing, and young de Forest became one of its foremost proponents. Later that year, his newfound passion turned business when he established the Ahmedabad Wood Carving Company, a workshop staffed by highly skilled Hindu artisans known as *mistri*. The *mistri* were trained in the rare, centuries-old traditional Indian woodworking techniques that de Forest so greatly admired; his first commission was the replication of the prized motifs onto teak panels used in his later designs.

De Forest also sent samples home to his sometimes-collaborator, friend, and then-interior design associate, Louis Comfort Tiffany, and was pleased to learn that India's imperiled traditional arts quickly garnered stateside acceptance. Tiffany prominently featured the Ahmedabad panels in his acclaimed circa 1881 design for the William S. Kimball House in Rochester, New York. Shortly thereafter, de Forest and the workshop produced panels for other designers and cabinetmakers, examples of which can be found in a distinctive pair of benches and an asymmetrical *étagère*, all manufactured circa 1880–1890.

In wake of the panels' success and aware of Western society's growing enthusiasm for exotic design, de Forest recognized his opportunity to be an artistic ambassador for India to America, while also establishing himself as a designer. In late 1881, he first conceived of specific furnishings to be executed by the Ahmedabad Wood Carving Company, which innovatively fused traditional Indian motifs and craftsmanship with Western forms. These were not only the first American-designed pieces produced by the Company's *mistri*, but also, the first and only furnishings of their kind in the world. Masterfully crafted in teakwood and adorned on almost every surface with intricate, hand-carved, traditional motifs inspired by local architectural wonders, de Forest's commissions were exquisite and unique.

De Forest's furnishings were created with Western uses in mind, without conforming to the cliché of anglicized aesthetics. He was careful to create an authentic, distinctive, and elegant interpretation of the raw, but refined, East Indian handicrafts, exemplified by one of his earliest designs, an elaborately carved side chair. His furnishings of lightly finished, linear teakwood panels appear delicate, sophisticated, and honest to the ethereality of Eastern aesthetic sensibilities, while his meticulous and lyrical relief carvings create a natural and romantic chiaroscuro across the surface.



Through his collaboration with the Ahmedabad Wood Carving Company, de Forest became one of the 19th Century's most notable advocates for the honest advancement of East Indian Crafts. Profoundly inspired by his cause, he returned to New York in mid-1882, eager to share the pieces he admired and designed with Western audiences. Later the following year, he opened a showroom at 9 East Seventeenth Street, where he furnished four rooms with items collected on his travels and commissioned in Ahmedabad. De Forest's offerings were highly regarded by the nation's cultured elite, and over the next two decades, the budding aesthete received several, significant design commissions that included an exotic room and furnishings at the 1893 Columbian Exposition, as well as the library of Andrew Carnegie's New York residence (extant and now part of the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum), among other prestigious sites.

By the early 20th Century, Western interest in Eastern design waned, and in 1907, de Forest sold his interest in the Ahmedabad Wood Carving Company. Today, he is revered as Aesthetic Era America's foremost authority on Indian design, and though there are few surviving examples of his artistic decorations, those that remain are as prized in the present as they were over a century ago.

DAVID PARKER



Parthenon Facing the Sea, 1909
oil on paper laid down on canvas, $12\frac{3}{4} \times 9\frac{1}{2}$ in.



On the Nile Below Cairo, 1876, oil on paper laid down on canvas, $9\frac{1}{2} \times 14$ in.



Himalayan Valley, Kashmir, 1881, oil on paper laid down on canvas, 8 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 12 in.



Bench, circa 1885–1895. Panels supplied by Lockwood de Forest and carved by Ahmedabad Wood Carving Company, Ahmedabad, India. Probably fabricated in New York, 42 × 62 × 22 in.



Buraq, Syria, 1876, oil on paper laid down on canvas, 6 ¼ × 10 in.



Ruins at Philae, Egypt, 1878, oil on paper laid down on canvas, 9 × 12 ¾ in.



Ruins, Jungle, Pandutan, circa 1881
oil on paper laid down on canvas, 10 × 7½ in.



Hijaneh, Syria, 1876, oil on paper laid down on canvas, 6¼ × 10 in.



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