

Lippincott Furniture: finding a North American accent in the South Pacific

During the boom years of the 1920s, an architectural competition for the new Auckland University College brought American architect Roy Alston Lippincott (1885-1969) to New Zealand. Lippincott's design for the University clock tower is distinctive and original in its synthesis of indigenous Maori design with European Gothic spires and pinnacles: it anticipated introductions of Maori motifs as decoration into Art Deco design a decade later. In a similar way, the Lippincott chairs and tables still remaining in the University's buildings introduce a Prairie School style and adapt it to the vernacular by interpreting it in native timbers. Using local materials is a cornerstone principle of the influential Arts and Crafts movement founded by William Morris in England in the nineteenth century. Lippincott was schooled in the North American equivalent of Arts and Crafts, the so-called "Chicago Style" based on the legacy of Louis Sullivan. Along with other early 20th century North American immigrants such as Sholto Smith, Lippincott was responsible for introducing this American variant of Arts and Crafts style to New Zealand.

Lippincott's move to New Zealand in 1921 had a profound effect on local architecture and architects and saw him completing the most significant architectural commissions of his career. Trained at Cornell University (1905-1909), Lippincott was chief draughtsman and junior partner to Walter Burley Griffin, an associate of Frank Lloyd Wright. Construction of Wright's Robie House in Oak Park, Chicago, was supervised by Lippincott, whose integrated approach to architecture was steeped in the Arts and Crafts approach to design. This ethos meant that everything in the house, from light fittings to coal scuttles, would be created by the architect as part of a holistic schema.

Marrying Genevieve Griffin, a sister of Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937), in 1914, Lippincott had been based in Australia and was involved in designing the new capital of Canberra when he won the Auckland University College Arts Building competition in 1920. The success of the Arts and Commerce Building led to a later commission from Auckland University College. Following the Great Depression, Lippincott was asked to design a structure to house the laboratories, classrooms, museum and offices for the Department of Biology (the Thomas Building) in 1937-39. Lippincott-designed laboratory stools, zoological display cabinets, reception desks and around 100 chairs remain on campus. They are usually made of varnished rimu, (*Dachrydium cuppressinum*, also called red pine), the main native timber used for furniture and flooring in New Zealand because it is both hard and dense. His designs are also distinctively geometrically shaped and golden in colour. Chairs are straight-backed with angled tops and openwork backs featuring paired vertical struts, linked together by short horizontal ties. The legs of tables and desks are finished cleanly with matching angular flares which rest on the floor.

The totally integrated aesthetic environment that Lippincott designed for the University Arts and Biology buildings has now been lost, but it is important to preserve the signature high back chairs and any desks or other furniture that remains. Their craftsman appearance, characterized by simple, straight forms which show the grain of the native timber to advantage, represents an important link to North American ideals of the Prairie School. Characteristic of Arts and Crafts ideals of creating interiors which matched the exterior design, these Lippincott designs are a moveable part of the University's history which is worthy of being carefully preserved and celebrated.