

**Minneapolis Institute of Arts
Accessions Proposal**

Curator: Jennifer Komar Olivarez

Department: Decorative Arts, Textiles, and Sculpture

Date: March 28, 2011

1. Description and Summary of Object or Group of Objects (please include image):

Loan Number: L92.218.1-4

Artist/Maker (nationality and date): George Grant Elmslie, American (born Scotland), 1869-1952

Title/Object: Dining room suite

Date: 1915

Medium: Mahogany, silver-plated metal, leaded glass, iridescent glass, wood inlays

Dimensions (inches & cms):

Sideboard: 35 1/4 x 44 x 22 7/8 in. (89.54 x 111.76 x 58.1 cm)

Chairs: 35 1/4 x 44 x 22 7/8 in. (89.54 x 111.76 x 58.1 cm)

Table top: 42 x 42 x 4 1/2 in. (106.68 x 106.68 x 11.43 cm)

Table legs: 28 x 37 x 13 1/2 in. (71.1 x 94 x 34.3 cm)

Signed, marked or inscribed: Not signed

Country of manufacture: USA, John S. Bradstreet and Company, Minneapolis, Minnesota, c. 1899-1932

Vendor/Donor: Dr. John Holloman, San Luis Obispo, California

For gifts check this box if a Deed of Gift has been completed.

Credit Line: The Walter C. and Mary C. Briggs Trust Fund

Present Location: MIA, G302

Price/Value:

2. Artist, Style, and explanation of the proposed object:

This dining room suite for Mrs. Hanna of Chicago, represented here by the table, two chairs, and the sideboard, was a one-of-a-kind design by the Prairie School firm of Purcell and Elmslie (Minneapolis, 1907-1921). Designed by George Grant Elmslie, who possessed a great talent for furniture design, it employs both a delicacy of design and a level of decoration not found in any other Prairie School furniture. The form of the suite's elements relies strongly on triangular and trapezoidal forms, imparting it with a dynamism not seen in the more rectilinear furniture designed by Frank Lloyd Wright from this period. The backs of the chairs are triangular in shape, echoing the so-called "surprise point" chairs Elmslie had designed as side chairs for Purcell's own living room at the Edna S. Purcell (now Purcell-Cutts) house two years earlier. The table top's form is trapezoidal in section, with "lopers" concealed within either end; these extenders could be pulled out to support leaves on either end of the table, allowing for the center of the table to remain as one intact surface. The drawer pulls of the sideboard are also triangular, a reference to the chair silhouettes. The suite's principal wood is mahogany, a luxurious imported wood used often in American furniture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but little employed by Prairie School or Arts and Crafts furniture designers and makers, who preferred American oak. The lustrous, reddish tone of the mahogany is complemented with a wealth of ornament: multicolored inlay, or "stringing," around the perimeter of the table and sideboard's tops; leaded glass inlay, also with triangular motifs of various colors, at the top rail of each chair; silver-plated metal rods employed vertically, enhancing the table and sideboard legs. In essence, the Hanna suite embodies a system of ornament as first developed by Louis Sullivan as an architectural approach, but carried over into domestic architecture by Purcell and Elmslie and Wright; it is a microcosm of that approach, central to full-flowered Prairie School architecture and design.

The John S. Bradstreet Company executed Elmslie's design to a very high level of quality. Purcell called the Hanna furniture the firm's "most highly jeweled set," and was so fond of it that he had it temporarily installed in his own house for a photo shoot for the journal *The Western Architect* in 1915, shortly after its completion and prior to its shipment to Mrs. Hanna. He felt it looked more appropriate in his home than his existing dining room suite, which he had designed and had produced in 1908, originally for his grandmother's house.

The MIA originally borrowed the Hanna suite in 1992 for display and eventual replication for the Purcell-Cutts House, based on Purcell's account of its appropriateness for his own home. It subsequently was kept on loan for the exhibition "Minnesota 1900: Art and Life on the Upper Mississippi 1890-1915" held at the MIA in 1994, and has continued as an extended loan to the museum.

3. Condition: The MIA needed to conduct conservation on the table when it was originally borrowed, as it had water damage from improper storage and the center of the base had split. This included removing a historically-inappropriate finish and refinishing

the pieces in an appropriate manner. This was conducted by conservator Richard Sorensen, who also reproduced a set of silver-plated rods to replace the original damaged set. Otherwise, the suite is in remarkable original condition. The chairs have been reupholstered.

4. Provenance: Suite originally designed for Mrs. Hanna of Chicago, completed 1915; sold by a Florida man (who inherited the suite from an older sister who, according to the current owner, obtained the suite in the 1910s, perhaps Mrs. Hanna herself) to Dr. John Holloman, then of Chicago, Illinois, 1974-75.

5. Related Objects:

Purcell and Elmslie furniture is represented in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago (with a clock and andirons from the Henry B. Babson House), and most prominently, at the MIA. A table and various chairs designed by George Elmslie remain in several private collections, and the Winona County Historical Society and the Merchants Bank of Winona also have examples of the Director's board room chairs from the Merchants Bank.

6. Complements the existing collection: The MIA retains the most comprehensive collection of Purcell and Elmslie architecture, furniture, art glass and decorative objects, including the Purcell-Cutts House; the house and many of the objects are documented in the book *Progressive Design in the Midwest: The Purcell-Cutts House and the Prairie School Collection at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts* (MIA, 2000); a selection of these objects are on view in the MIA's Bob Ulrich and Jill Dahlin Gallery of Architecture and Design (G300).

7. Plans for exhibiting: The Hanna suite, on view for several years in Gallery 302, provides a very good complement to the Minnesota paintings and decorative arts objects included in that gallery from the early 20th century. It has also been shown in the Prairie School gallery and could easily be shown there at any time. The Hanna suite, as a newly-acquired object for the Prairie School collection, could be a central element in an installation celebrating 100 years of the Purcell-Cutts House through the drawings and designs of George Elmslie; such an exhibition is being considered for 2013.

8. Why do you recommend the object? The Hanna suite is really one of a kind, as Purcell said, "their most highly jeweled set." It is without parallel within the large body of Purcell and Elmslie's design work; it is also without equal in delicacy and beauty in Prairie School furniture design as a whole. Along with the more muscular design of the dining room suite for the home of Mr. and Mrs. George Barton House by Frank Lloyd Wright (Buffalo, New York, 1904, MIA 99.29.1-9), the Hanna suite shows the other end of the spectrum in Prairie School design—its delicacy, detail, color, and dynamic elements are revelatory to those who have a passing familiarity with Prairie School design and/or little knowledge of the depth of talent cultivated in George Elmslie by Louis Sullivan over a twenty-year period together. Purcell envisioned the Hanna suite, or a similar version of it, as the completion of the major furniture elements for his own

home—a vision that was never realized. For the MIA to acquire the original Hanna suite is to recognize the importance of the suite to the firm but also to acknowledge it as a singular example of excellence in Prairie School design that perfectly complements the museum's top collection of this material. Frankly speaking, this is the MIA's chance to acquire the suite directly from the owner, as the museum has been given first refusal due to its good care of the suite over its nearly twenty-year loan period, and with a tight time frame due to the owner's current financial needs.

9. Comparable market prices:

Elmslie furniture is very rare on the market, so it is difficult to price, but in 2005 an Elmslie chair from the Sullivan/Elmslie Bradley House #1 in Madison, Wisconsin sold for \$39,000. Its design was similar to our chairs from the Purcell and Elmslie Keith suite (Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 1910, MIA 99.62.1-9), with a reticulated back. The Hanna suite is in very good condition and is a unique example of Prairie School furniture and singular within the furniture designs of Purcell and Elmslie. P&E chairs tend to be estimated at about \$15,000 - 20,000 each at auction and retail.

Signature and Date

