



# **RAMBUSCH: CRAFT AND DESIGN**

**April 12 through May 28, 1994**

**Lehman College Art Gallery**



## Rambusch : Craft and Design

The Rambusch Decorating Company, established in New York City in 1898 by Frode Christian Valdimar Rambusch (22), continues to be a vibrant fourth generation, family-run design studio and craft workshop where over 20,000 projects have been both conceived and executed. These projects, although world-wide, have been concentrated for the most part in North America, with over 100 located in the Bronx alone, starting in 1907 with the interior decoration of St. Jerome's Roman Catholic Church, Mott Haven (28) (see the display map of names and locations of these Bronx projects).

It all began in 1888 when Frode Rambusch, master painter-decorator, flipped a coin in his native Denmark to determine his future destination—the United States of America or Czarist Russia. In March of 1889, Frode Rambusch landed in New York. The firm today, presided over by Viggo Bech Rambusch, grandson of its founder, and his sons Edwin and Martin, has studios and workshops in New York's Greenwich Village and Clifton, New Jersey, carrying on the Arts and Crafts tradition of providing custom-made design solutions in multiple areas including Stained Glass (10), Art Metal (2, 13, 16), Woodcarving (20), Lighting (1, 7, 11), Liturgical Arts (26, 27), Decorative Painting (4, 5), Murals, Mosaic (21), and Sculpture.

The history of the Arts and Crafts Movement, with its emphasis on the integrity of hand workmanship and natural materials, begins in the mid-19th century in England with the work of William Morris and others. In the 20th century, the Wiener Werkstätte in Austria, as well as the names of Louis Comfort Tiffany and Gustav Stickley in America come to mind. One of the few surviving family-owned design firms of its kind, it is from within this tradition that the Rambusch Company looks forward to the challenges of the next century, while pausing to look back with pride on its many accomplishments of the past ninety-five years.

Rambusch fabricates its own designs and from its inception has provided design solutions for a broad variety of secular and religious contexts. The seemingly unrelated areas of church and theater interiors, for example, have been a mainstay of the firm since its founding (5, 9, 28), sharing as they do certain basic design needs such as accomodating large numbers of people whose thoughts and emotions need to be directed toward a unitary visual goal in a setting of adequate, yet emotive lighting.

A major area of the firm's specialization is that of lighting design and lighting fixtures. Several of the firm's designs for resorations/replications of historic lighting fixtures are featured in the exhibition (1, 7, 8, 15) as well as a current design (23, 24, 25) shown in two stages of its development.

The design process itself at Rambusch generally works in the following way. A sponsor in the firm first discusses design requirements and needs with the client. Then the sponsor and the designers work together to create actual solutions. Drawings, sketches, and renderings are made to help the client visualize the choices. Finally, once the solution is agreed upon, other drawings are made, some to scale, others full size. These are the documents that guide the artisans in the translation of an idea into an object. Throughout this process there is a continuous exchange between designer and artisan. Although a commonplace dynamic in generations past, this particular design process is unusual, indeed rare, in the present-day United States.

The purpose of this exhibition is to enable the visitor in the gallery to begin to understand some aspects of the design process itself, its complexity and the precision necessary in the skilled translation of the solution on paper into a three-dimensional object. The hope is that this understanding will be translated into a renewed respect for the varied cultural resources of the Bronx in particular and their subsequent care.

The Rambusch Company, in the person of its own founder as well as in the many highly skilled artisans and designers from all over the world who have been associated with the firm up to the present day, exemplifies the diversity of the immigrant experience which continues to be a major energizing factor in the culture of greater New York today.

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\* Please note: numbers in parentheses in the text refer to specific items in the exhibition.



**Suggestions for further reading:**  
Clark, R., J. *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America*. Princeton, 1972.  
Naylor, G. *The Arts and Crafts Movement*. Cambridge, Mass., 1971.  
Pevsner, N. *The Sources of Modern Architecture and Design*. New York, 1968.  
Rambusch, C. G. "Rambusch Decorating Company: Ninety Years of Art Metal," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, Vol IX, 1988, pp. 6-43.

**Acknowledgments:**

In preparing for this exhibition, we would like to express a special thanks to Susan Hoeltzel, the Director of the Lehman College Art Gallery, for her patience and enthusiasm in seeing this project through to its completion. Special thanks are also due Skowmon Hastanan, Registrar of the Gallery, for all her "hand-on" help and advice; Ms. Mary Ann Siano; Christopher Anselmo Priore, Education Coordinator of the Lehman College Art Gallery; as well as Mr. Leonard Weisberger, College Lab Technician in the Department of Art.

Without the able assistance and cooperation of the entire Rambusch Company and its archivist, none of this would have been possible. Lehman College extends as well a particular thank-you to the President, Board of Governors, and the Design Committee of the National Arts Club in New York for including mention of our exhibition in their literature for the concurrent exhibition *Rambusch Current Work: The Process of Design* (in the Marquis Gallery at the National Arts Club, April 4 - May 1, 15 Gramercy Park South, New York, N.Y. 10003).

A final note of thanks to: the Rev. Baker and congregation of St. Philip Neri Roman Catholic Church; Mr. José Rodriguez; Ms. Marisa Rivera-Rodriguez; Ms. Valerie Sioufas and Mr. Kenneth Lally.

## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

(1)

**Morris High School, Bronx, New York**  
**Eight Light Pendant Luminaire**. 1987  
graphite on vellum, 41 3/4 x 30"

These light fixture designs for Morris High School (166th St. & Boston Road), the first public high school to open in the Bronx, were created by Rambusch designer Joe Oddi to blend with the landmarked building's Collegiate Gothic Style. The work of architect C. B. J. Snyder, completed in 1904, the building is not only an individual designated New York City landmark, as are also several of its interior spaces, it is also the centerpiece of the Morris High School Historic District.

(2)

**St. James Cathedral Basilica, Brooklyn, NY**  
**Tabernacle for Altar of Reservation**  
sepia drawing, 68 x 36"

For the Roman Catholic Cathedral/Basilica of St. James, Brooklyn, New York, a handsome Neo-Georgian building of 1903 (George H. Streeton, architect) Rambusch designer Thomas Glisson created this Tabernacle for the Altar of Reservation within the building, modeling its form on that of the copper-clad steeple of the church itself. The Tabernacle is a liturgical object in which consecrated Hosts are kept. Rambusch has specialized in creating such liturgical furnishings since the company's founding in 1898.

(3)

**Tabernacle**

color photograph mounted on Masonite,  
30 x 20"

(4)

**Waldorf-Astoria**

interior rendering, watercolor. (in silver frame),  
30 x 40 1/2"

An early commission undertaken by Frode Rambusch and his new firm seems, in hindsight, to have been prophetic. In 1898 the firm received a contract for decorative work in the newly built Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, which was then on the site of the present Empire State Building at Fifth Avenue and West 34th St. In the 1930's under the direction of Frode's sons, Harold and Viggo F. E. Rambusch, the firm was not only called in to execute the lobby designs for the new Empire State Building (1931, Shreve, Lamb & Harmon), but were also to design and execute the paint color scheme and silver leafing of the new Art-Deco style Waldorf-Astoria Hotel on Park Avenue, also of 1931 (Schultze & Weaver). The talents of the gifted artist and chief designer Leif Neandross, are revealed in the rendering here for the Waldorf-Astoria.

(5)

**Basilica of the Assumption**  
**Baltimore Cathedral**

watercolor on paper, 33 1/2 x 28 1/4"

A second early commission of the firm, around the turn of the century, for painted decoration in Benjamin Latrobe's early 19th century Roman Catholic Cathedral of Baltimore (now Basilica of the Assumption) is especially significant, for the Rambusch firm was not only to return many times to the Cathedral itself later in its developments - the rendering of the interior of this important building included in the exhibition is a ca. 1964 color study for new painting, decorat-



ing, lighting, and liturgical furnishings—it was also to specialize in design solutions for interiors of houses of worship representing a broad range of religious traditions.

(6)

Candlestick drawing

(7)

**Old Senate Chamber Chandelier  
Washington D.C.,  
Luminaire, 1975**

graphite on vellum, 36 x 66"

The restoration of the original United States Senate Chamber in the U. S. Capital Building, Washington, D. C., was on an official Bicentennial project of 1976. Robert Cornelius of Philadelphia had made the original 24-light Argand chandelier that lighted the Chamber in 1837. This was modified to burn gas in 1847 and subsequently removed. To determine the appearance of the original, Rambusch designers turned to period sources. An engraving by Thomas Doney showing the Chamber in 1847, during the Clay-Webster debates, was a good beginning. The Rambusch handmade, 11-foot long replica is so accurate that the whale oil stored in the central reservoir could, by gravity flow, move through the hollow arm and be drawn by capillary action up the wick to the flame. In fact, the fixture is wired for electricity, but all the engineering for its original function is there, in this twentieth-century replica.

(8)

**Old Senate Chamber Room G 228  
Chandelier, 1975**

graphite on paper, 32 x 22"

(9)

**Roxy Theater, 7th Ave. & 50th St., Manhattan**

interior rendering, watercolor  
(wood frame under glass w/linen mat)  
23 3/4 x 26"

A major area of endeavor during the first decades of the Rambusch Company's existence, and prophetic as well of a continuing tradition in the firm's history, has been the decoration of theater interiors. Arguably the supreme example of this fantastic genre was the interior designed entirely by the Rambusch Company, pictured here for the Roxy Theater (1927, Walter W. Ahlschlager, architect) built by S. L. "Roxy" Rothafel just above Times Square (now demolished). The original rendering of the interior included in the exhibition only hints at the visual splendor of this great, gilded, "Picture Palace" for the people. During the 1920's, the Rambusch studios decorated over 800 movie interiors for the Warner, Paramount, Fox, and Loew's organizations.

(10)

**St. Francis**

stained glass in painted wood light box  
Joep Nicolas, 1948  
74 1/3 x 28 1/2 x 8"

This stained glass panel depicting St. Francis of Assisi, a representative piece by the Dutch

artist Joep Nicolas who worked in the Rambusch Stained Glass Studios from 1939-1954, stands for a major area of endeavor in the history of the Rambusch Company: the design and execution of major new stained glass as well as the restoration of important historic stained glass.

Francis of Assisi in Italy (ca. 1182-1226 A.D.) was the founder of the Order of Friars Minor, or Franciscans, and has often been depicted, as we see him here, as a patron saint of animals and birds, based on many stories about the saint's deep affection for all living creatures.

(11)

**State Capital, Albany, New York  
Two-Light Wall Sconce, 1983**

drawing, 35 1/2 x 44 1/4"  
accomp. by glass globe

(12)

**Roman Catholic Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul,  
Philadelphia, PA**

**High Altar candlestick front elevation,  
1957**

graphite on paper, 49 x 30"

(13)

**Roman Catholic Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul,  
Philadelphia, PA**

**High Altar Mass candlestick, 1957**  
graphite on paper, 42 x 24 1/2"

(14)

**Grace Church, Brooklyn Heights, New York  
Handrail, 1992**

drawing, 21 x 30" (folded dimension)  
41 1/2 X 30" (unfolded)  
blue print with watercolor and crayon

(15)

**Church of the Ascension, 5th Ave., Manhattan  
Chandelier**

drawing, 35 1/2 x 16"  
sepia print with watercolor and crayon

(16)

**Rambusch Plaque - repoussé**

(17)

**Ave Maria Shrine**

watercolor drawing  
actual plaque: bronze & enamel

The work of Rambusch designer Alfred Tulk in bronze and vitreous enamel in a *champlevé* technique, this devotional plaque of ca. 1930 has a complex iconography illustrating major events from the life of Mary, beginning with the Annunciation at the left and ending with the Assumption and Coronation at the top. Reflecting an Art Déco style (so named after the 1925 Paris Exposition des Arts Décoratifs) in a work of religious art, this plaque is the work of a noted Rambusch designer who, among other projects, was responsible for the design and decoration of the Board Room Suite in that shrine of Art Déco, the 1929 Chanin Building on East 42nd Street in Manhattan (architects, Sloan



& Robertson). In its 95-year history, the Rambusch Company has indeed worked in almost all the major decorative and revival styles, from the turn-of-the-century *Art Nouveau* to the so-called Post-Modernism of today (see # 23-25).

(18)

**St. Philip Neri, Bronx, New York**

black and white photograph mounted on board,  
19 1/2 x 14"

For the Roman Catholic Church of St. Philip Neri on the Grand Concourse near Bedford Park Boulevard, a rock-faced granite Arts and Crafts country-style church of 1899, with a fine wooden hammer-beam ceiling in its interior, Rambusch has done lighting work, interior decorating, stained glass, and mosaics in association with the architectural firm of Starrett and VanVleck from 1933 to ca. 1955. A principal accomplishment of the Rambusch Company here is the combining of several devotional images of saints representative of the successive ethnic communities the parish has served, including its patron, Philip Neri (1515-1595) at its center, into a single unified and impressive *reredos* (an ornamental screen or partition wall behind an altar) to be seen in this photograph. Rambusch also executed the brilliant altar cross and tabernacle seen beneath it as well as the candlesticks at either side. The altar table itself, in accordance with changes instituted by Vatican Council II (1966) has since been moved closer to the congregation and has thus necessitated other changes now visible in the video tape documenting not only this interior (see monitor in the gallery-the video itself is courtesy of Mr. José Rodriguez and Marisa Rivera-Rodriguez), but also that of St. Raymond's Roman Catholic Church (Castle Hill Avenue & East Tremont Avenue-1897, George H. Streepton, architect) where, among other commissions, the Rambusch Company created a massive marble *baldacchino* (a fixed, honorific canopy over the principal altar of a church) in 1933.

(19)

**R.H. Macy, Herald Square, Manhattan  
Chandelier, 1981**

watercolor with graphite on paper, 25 x 19"  
Architect: Norman Rosenfeld  
(in wood frame under glass)

(20)

**Sample of wood carving**

early 20th century  
oak, 8 x 31 1/2 x 3"

(21)

**San Vitale, Ravenna**

Roman/smalti mosaic, 24 x 18"  
sample based on mosaic at Ravenna, Italy

(22)

**Rambusch Office, ca. 1900  
Black & White photo mural**

3 panels, 74 x 34 1/2" each

Having both studied and practiced art and design in several European cities, following upon his apprenticeship to a Danish master

painter in Odense, Frode Rambusch returned to Denmark in 1888. Seeing little opportunity for advancement at home, like many younger Europeans of his day, Frode Rambusch decided he would leave his native land. As family lore would have it, the toss of a coin determined his destination. His choices were New York or St. Petersburg, Russia. Working as a self-employed craftsman-decorator since 1891, Frode incorporated the Rambusch Glass and Decorating Company on December 17th, 1898 in a studio located at 160 Fifth Avenue at 21st Street, which was the decorating area of the city at that time. 160 Fifth Avenue was also home to the architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White along with other tenants. The photograph shows the Rambusch studio ca. 1900 with Frode Rambusch at the center back. The gentleman in the bowler hat at the lower right is an apprentice, one Mr. F. Rickman.

(23)

**1 New York Plaza, Manhattan  
Custom chandelier design for Main Lobby,  
1993**

graphite on tracing paper,  
34 x 22"

(24)

**1 New York Plaza, Manhattan  
Custom chandelier design for Main Lobby,  
1993**

sepia print, 33 1/2 x 21 3/4"

(25)

**1 New York Plaza, Manhattan  
Custom chandelier design for Main Lobby,  
1993**

sepia with watercolor on paper,  
33 3/4 x 22"

(26)

**Immaculate Conception Center, Douglaston,  
New York  
Presider's Chair, 1993**

sepia with colorpencil, 11 1/4 x 17"

(27)

**Immaculate Conception Center, Douglaston,  
New York  
Presider's Chair, platform details, 1993**

graphite on paper, 17 x 22"

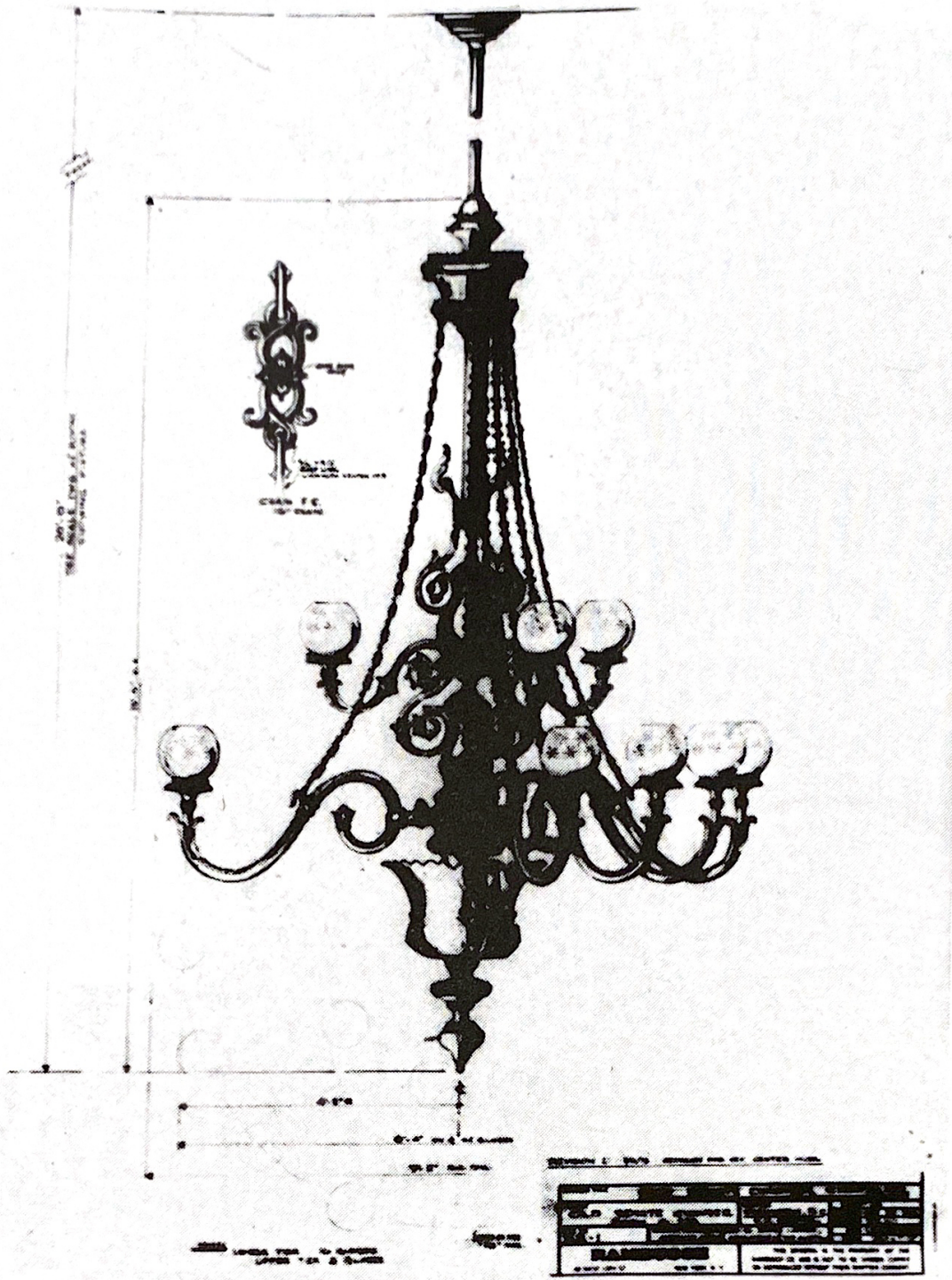
(28)

**Photo: Dome Ceiling of St. Jerome's  
Church, Mott Haven, Bronx**

photo credits: V. Sioufas & K. Lally

Decorated in its entirety in 1907 by the Rambusch Company, the Roman Catholic Church of St. Jerome (1898, Delhi & Howard, architects), located at 138th St. and Alexander Avenue, within the officially designated Mott Haven Historic District, is an outstanding example of the early work of the firm. The photographs here (provided through the courtesy of Valerie Sioufas and Ken Lally) show the original painted dome with its eye of God the Father within a triangle and interlocking triple rings symbolic of the Christian Trinity, framed in turn by choirs of angels in heaven.





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