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Reginald Machell at Point Loma

American craft had its first brush with spiritualism at a Theosophical colony on Point Loma, east of San Diego. Theosophy was created in 1875 by a charismatic Russian occultist named Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891), who melded elements of Hinduism, Buddhism and sheer invention into a quasi-religion that drew numerous followers around the turn of the century. Blavatsky held that anyone could attain a higher level of consciousness, and that this spiritual work was a matter of direct experience, not requiring the mediation of any church. Theosophy attracted people troubled by the materialism of the age and hungry for a more personal experience of the spiritual.

Another charismatic woman, Katherine Tingley, became head of the American Theosophical Society in 1896. She was a former actress with a desire to help people and a vision of a better society. With funding from several wealthy men, she established a “White City” on the shores of the Pacific and called it Lomaland. It featured two round buildings with purple glass domes that were lit up at night, along with a boarding school, orphanage, irrigated orchard, amphitheater and craft workshops. In the school, children were taught art and some crafts, as well as the virtues of such physical labor as gardening. Adult residents of Lomaland had to contribute to its finances. There were workshops for woodcarving, blacksmithing, printing and bookbinding, sewing, embroidery and other crafts. Many items were sold to the public, among them batiks in a moody symbolic style. The most impressive product was furniture.

The creative artistic force at Lomaland was an expatriate British painter, Reginald Machell (1854-1927). He had trained in Paris at the Académie Julian. At Point Loma, he carved chairs, screens and stools decorated with forms reminiscent of Art Nouveau, Celtic interlace, Gothic tracery, flames and wings. They are wonderfully inventive, completely unlike any other furniture made in America. The throne he created for Tingley is typical: the back and sides of the chair are carved into fantastic writhing shapes and the whole is painted in a cream color. In effect, the chair is a platform for a collection of carved panels, a virtuoso display of design and chisel-work. But it's not a great example of sound construction: the joints are held together with pegs, which are notoriously prone to coming loose. As for the symbolism of the intertwining

elements of the disk and the winglike forms above, it's anybody's guess. Machell left no explanation.

Tingley died in 1935. Deprived of her leadership, the Theosophical Society abandoned Lomaland and moved to Pasadena in 1942.