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Author(s): Alan Crawford

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# Ideas and Objects: The Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain

Alan Crawford

*Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization.*<sup>1</sup>

The speaker is William Morris, the leading figure of the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain. The sentiment in this quotation is negative and perhaps even shocking; but it represents my subject. I want to suggest that the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain was inspired by the desire to produce beautiful things and by a hatred of modern civilization.

The Wolfsonian's inaugural exhibition, and the book which accompanies it, convey two arguments with admirable clarity. One is the general argument that design serves to express ideas, and that it shifts our perceptions of the world. The other is that design in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was preoccupied with the experience of modernity.

The Arts and Crafts movement in Britain fits well into these arguments. Not since the Gothic Revival earlier in the century, whose idealism was derived from a powerful religious movement, had the designing and making of things carried such serious meanings. Arts and Crafts people had ambitious ideas about the nature of work and the improvement of design, and they were always, if obliquely, concerned with modernity. What is more, the Arts and Crafts movement was linked with politics, for some of the most important figures in the movement were also part of the early Socialist movement in Britain.

In this paper, I will concentrate on the general point that design serves to express ideas; I will take up the themes of modernity and politics at the end. My argument goes in two directions. It starts with ideas and goes towards objects, asking what effect these ideas had on design. Then it turns round, starting with objects and listing their typical qualities, in order to discover the spirit in which they were designed.

Both approaches are necessary, for the relationship between ideas and objects in the Arts and Crafts movement is not always straightforward. Sometimes you cannot move directly from idea to object, as from plan to execution. Sometimes the objects contradict

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<sup>1</sup> May Morris, ed., *The Collected Works of William Morris*, vol. 23, (London: Longmans Green and Company, 1910–15), 279.

Figure 1  
72–3 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, London,  
by C. R. Ashbee, 1896–97.  
Elevation and cutaway drawing.  
Drawing by Sutton Webster.



the ideas they appear to illustrate. The free disposition of the windows on the elevation of 72-3 Cheyne Walk, London (figure 1) seems to be a clear statement of a free plan, an example of the Arts and Crafts idea that buildings and objects should express their functional and structural character without pretense, that they should be “honest.” But if you compare the elevation with the cutaway drawing, you will see that it does not express the internal arrangement at all; if anything it belies it. I do not say that honesty has no bearing on this design. Ashbee meant you to read the front as honest. But you cannot read this design as a straightforward example of Arts and Crafts honesty. It is complex and contradictory, what children would call “pretend” honesty.

The Arts and Crafts movement in Britain was animated by three principal ideas. The first was “the Unity of Art,” Arts and Crafts people opposed the hierarchy in which the arts were arranged in late-Victorian Britain: painting and sculpture at the top as fine arts; architecture somewhere in the middle, less artistic but still with high professional status; and the decorative arts at the bottom, their status low both artistically and professionally. They argued that, in the Middle Ages, this hierarchy had not existed; and that in their own day, painters, sculptors, architects, and decorative artists should be on an equal footing again.

Two narratives will show the bearing of this idea. In 1884, a group of progressive architects established the Art Workers’ Guild in London under the banner of the Unity of Art. They believed that architecture should be seen as an art, not as the profession into which modernization was shaping it. They set up the Guild as a private club where they could associate with painters, sculptors, and decorative artists; and talk about Donatello or bronze-casting. They did not want to associate with lawyers and quantity surveyors, and local government officers, or to talk about drains.

Figure 2

Ernest Gimson and Sidney and Ernest Barnsley with their families at Pinbury Park, Gloucestershire, c.1896. Archive photograph, Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum.



About ten years later, three architects made a rather different move, but in the same spirit. Ernest Gimson and Ernest and Sidney Barnsley went to live in the Cotswolds, then a fairly remote rural area. They wore soft collars, corduroys, and big boots, as if they were farmers (figure 2). They hoped that, by moving to the country, they could get away from paperwork and professionalism. And they were not disappointed. They were intimately involved in the few buildings they designed, mostly locally and, alongside their building work, they set up the workshops which produced plasterwork, metalwork, and particularly furniture. The architects of the Art Workers' Guild associated themselves with artists; Ernest Gimson and the Barnsley brothers associated themselves with craftsmen.

The "Unity of Art" shaped the story of the Arts and Crafts movement in this way—the Art Workers' Guild became the central Arts and Crafts organization in London. But it did not have a great effect on the design of buildings or objects. There were a number of building schemes in which architects, artists, and craftsmen worked together in its name; Holy Trinity Church, Sloane Street, London, designed by J. D. Sedding and embellished by a group of distinguished artist-craftsmen between 1888 and 1892, is the best known. But the designers of the Arts and Crafts movement were always individualists, and though the artist-craftsmen thought and talked a good deal about the Unity of Art, it is hard to see what difference this made to their work here, or in other places. Holy Trinity is simply a church decorated by various designers, working in sympathy but following their own preferences.

The second idea was "Joy in Labor." The idea was that the ordinary experience of work can become a source of pleasure through the play of imagination. Like so much of the Arts and Crafts movement, this idea was rooted in a Romantic sense of the

past, and specifically in a long passage called “The Nature of Gothic” in the second volume of John Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice*, published in 1853. Ruskin read the history of Venice in its buildings, and when he looked at the carved detail of Venetian Gothic buildings, he imagined the workmen to be ordinary workmen of their time. Left to their own imaginations, he thought, they produced carvings which were rough, vivid, and imaginative.

For Ruskin, the freedom of this Gothic work was a stinging indictment of work as he imagined it to be in modern factories. He wrote:

Men may be beaten, chained, tormented, yoked like cattle, slaughtered like summer flies, and yet remain in one sense, and the best sense, free. [He is thinking of the Middle Ages: political tyranny and creative freedom.] But to smother their souls with them [he is thinking of modern factories], to blight and hew into rotting pollards the suckling branches of their human intelligence, to make the flesh and skin which, after the worm’s work on it, is to see God, into leathern thongs to yoke machinery with, this is to be slave-masters indeed.<sup>2</sup>

This is as fierce a piece of antimodernism as you could hope to find, fixing its anger on the image of the factory, but sweeping the whole rationalist temper of the nineteenth century with its savage rhetoric. And note Ruskin’s political language: he taunts his readers with the thought that, if they cannot achieve creative freedom, then all their precious nineteenth-century rights, their votes, their democratic freedoms, are worse than medieval slavery.

When William Morris set up his own printing press in the 1890s, he published “The Nature of Gothic” as a small book, and wrote in the preface:

The lesson which Ruskin here teaches us is that art is the expression of man’s pleasure in labor; that it is possible for man to rejoice in his work, for, strange as it may seem to us today, there have been times when he did rejoice in it.<sup>3</sup>

This joy in work, this creative freedom, was equated with handwork by the Arts and Crafts movement, and we can see the impact of this idea on Arts and Crafts objects whose appearance declares that they are handmade—the hammer marks on metalwork, the fluid, irregular contours of some pottery and glass, and the marks of the adze or chisel on wood or stone. But though details like this are very common on Arts and Crafts objects, they are only details. The real importance of joy in labor in the Arts and Crafts, and of its dark twin, the drudgery of machine-minding, was not that they guided the act of designing, but that they served as myths of personal endeavor. In the fitful light of Ruskin’s prose, Arts and Crafts people saw dark factories, men losing their souls in day after

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2 E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, eds., *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 10, (London: George Allen and Co., 1903–12), 193.

3 John Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic: A Chapter of the Stones of Venice* (London: Kelmscott Press, 1892), i.

day of minding machines. That made it feel good to stitch a binding by hand, or to mix a new batch of enamels. And it is noticeable that, though the idea of joy in labor really applied to *all* people who worked in factories, the Arts and Crafts did not address themselves to those trades where factory production was most advanced. They addressed themselves to architecture, furniture, metalwork, textiles, pottery, stained glass, and certain kinds of printing. This is not a list of industrialized trades as such, it is a list of the decorative arts. Joy in labor begins to look less like an Arts and Crafts program for changing society, and more like a banner under which decorative artists could do what they would have done anyway.

The third idea was “Design Reform,” that is, a movement to improve the design of objects consumed by the public. Unlike the previous two ideas, it was not peculiar to the Arts and Crafts movement. The archetypal design reformers were the mid-Victorians Henry Cole and Richard Redgrave. It was they who set up a national system of art education in Britain, which became known as “the South Kensington system,” in order to improve standards of design in British manufacturing.

The Arts and Crafts movement inherited much of this approach. Arts and Crafts designers were generally high-minded people and they talked about their work in terms “honesty,” “simplicity,” and “the nature of materials.” Though words like these could be embodied in Arts and Crafts designs in complex and contradictory ways, as Ashbee’s house on Cheyne Walk shows, they did encourage Arts and Crafts people to feel that they had a mission to improve public taste. And in schools of art, in particular, design reform and the Arts and Crafts served a single program: the simplicity of working by hand lent itself to educational purposes while, at the same time, national and local government used the schools to improve the standard of design in local trades as a way of improving economic performance. In the 1880s and 1890s, many schools started classes in decorative arts relevant to local trades. In Birmingham, for example, where the city’s economy was heavily dependent on decorative metalwork and jewelry, the city council established the Birmingham Municipal School of Art in 1885. Birmingham’s progressive policies were shaped by the city’s elite, and the School of Art satisfied the advocates of Arts and Crafts ideals as well as the commercial concerns of the Birmingham council.

We have reached the halfway stage in looking at the relationship between Arts and Crafts ideas and Arts and Crafts objects. I do not think that ideas have taken us very far towards an understanding of the objects. In fact, they seem to have had more to do with how Arts and Crafts people felt about themselves—as artists, as happy, as reformers—than with their work. It is as if their minds were focused not so much on the design of objects as on the experience of designing and making them. This is crucial to my argument.

Once one accepts that the primary focus of Arts and Crafts ideas was not so much objects as personal experience, a lot of things fall into place. The Unity of Art (artists and craftsmen working together), Joy in Labor (the creative satisfaction of ordinary work), Design Reform (making manufactured objects better), all three can be seen as facets of a single idea which I take to be at the heart of the Arts and Crafts movement. That is the idea that creativity can be part of the daily experience of ordinary people at work; that it is not something special, not the preserve of fine artists and geniuses. That was the idea which was in Ruskin's mind when he studied the details of Venetian architecture. The hope of the Arts and Crafts movement was that experience might become general. I will come back to this idea at the end.

I am now going to turn around and look at Arts and Crafts objects, in the hope of getting a clearer sense of the spirit in which they were designed. I am going to list the qualities which I think characterize them. Not all of these qualities will be found on all objects, but I think almost any Arts and Crafts object will have more than one of them. They do not amount to an Arts and Crafts style, for Arts and Crafts objects are too varied visually for that. But they do amount to a common visual language.

There is no single English word for my first quality. I want a word which means that the design of the object reflects its nature and purpose; it does not embellish it unduly or make it look like something else. So I am going to invent one, "thinginess." Members of the Arts and Crafts movement used to admire this quality in products which they thought had escaped the attentions of the decorative artist, such as sports equipment and cooking utensils. (Nowadays, of course, design and consumption are having a field day in just these two areas.) The three objects in figure 3 were made by a workshop called the Birmingham Guild of Handicraft in the 1890s, and seeing them together provides a neat illustration of thinginess. They are objects of different status: the flowerpot and the

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Figure 3  
Brass- and copper-wares, probably designed by Arthur Dixon, and made by the Birmingham Guild of Handicraft in the mid-1890s.  
Photograph: Alan Crawford. Objects in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum.



Figure 4

Part of the fifth exhibition of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in London, 1896. Archive photograph, National Art Library, London. Pressmark RC.LL.41, 57.



table lamp belong in the drawing room, and the kettle belongs in the kitchen. Yet they look much the same. Thinginess has overridden middle-class propriety, and the drawing room objects emulate the simplicity of the kitchen. When words such as “simplicity” and “honesty” occur in Arts and Crafts writing, as they often do, they usually refer to this kind of plainness.

Which brings me to the second quality of Arts and Crafts objects, and that is almost exactly the opposite of the first. Walter Crane once wrote:

The great advantage and charm of the Morrisian method is that it lends itself either to simplicity or to splendor. You might be almost plain enough to please Thoreau, with a rush-bottomed chair, piece of matting, and oaken trestle table; or you might have gold and lustre (the choice ware of William De Morgan) gleaming from the sideboard, and jeweled light in your windows, and walls hung with rich arras tapestry.<sup>4</sup>

Elaborate ornament was just as important in the Arts and Crafts as plainness, as the view of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition in figure 4 shows. A plain cabinet in the foreground is surrounded by the sumptuous tapestries of Burne-Jones and Morris and Company. If this taste for elaboration seems to contradict the first quality, thinginess, remember that we are looking at objects and investigating taste. If we were still in the first part of this paper, there would be a contradiction, because we would be talking about abstract ideas, “Simplicity” and “Splendor.” But here we are dealing with taste, which is more subtle and more generous than ideas. It is perfectly possible—perhaps even necessary—to enjoy the simple and the splendid aspects of the Arts and Crafts.

4 *William Morris to Whistler: Papers and Addresses on Art and Craft and the Commonweal* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1911), 54–5.



Figure 5

71–5 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, London,  
by C. R. Ashbee, 1896–1913.  
Photograph: Anthony Kersting.



The third quality is association. It is normal in Arts and Crafts objects for some aspect of the design, often but not always the ornament, to be associated with, or refer to, something else. So when you are trying to understand the object, you are looking at its construction, use, and formal qualities; and at its associations. This all sounds very technical, but it is a familiar part of decorative art.

Arts and Crafts objects usually spread their field of association over two areas. One was nature and the other was the past. Nature in Arts and Crafts designs was typically both stylized and realistic. In the handbook *Silverwork and Jewellery* by the leading designer Henry Wilson, there is a section on how to make a pendant in the form of a nightingale. It begins, “First go and watch one singing.”<sup>5</sup> Designs like this were meant to carry the mind out into the countryside. It was a Romantic approach, and very different from that of such mid-Victorian design reformers as Henry Cole and Christopher Dresser, who argued that ornament should be abstracted from nature, so that it looked more like geometry and less like things.

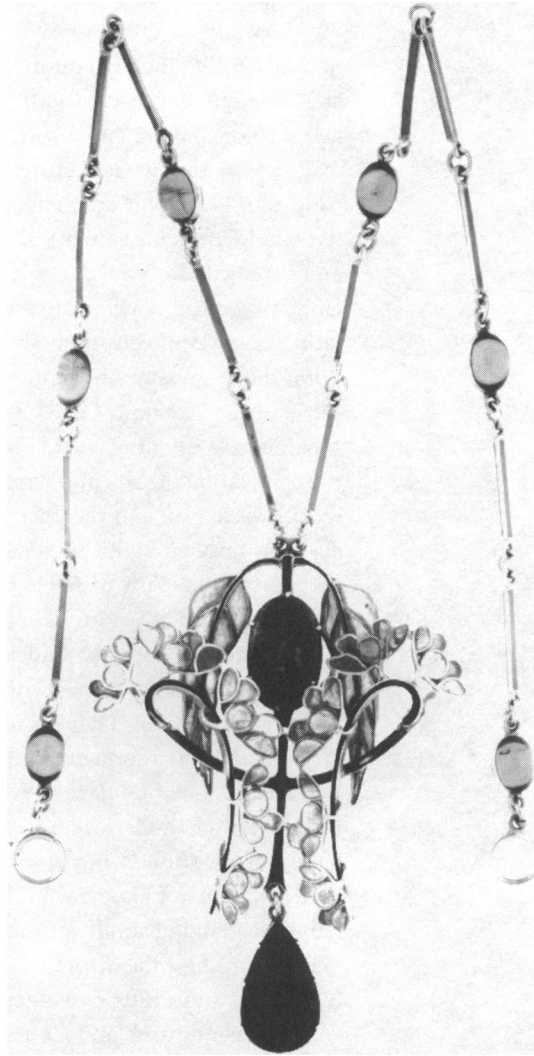
Figure 5 shows a group of houses by C. R. Ashbee in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, London, including that shown in figure 1. The picturesque details and jumbled facades recall the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century streetscape of English country towns. We naturally think of this streetscape as the “source” of Ashbee’s designs, where he went for inspiration. But we should also think of it as the “association” of his designs: he thought of Chelsea as a kind of urban village, growing through history, and he wanted to convey

5 Henry Wilson, *Silverwork and Jewellery* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons Ltd., 1903), 127.

Figure 6

Necklace and pendant by Fred Partridge,  
c.1906–10.

Photograph: Sotheby's, London.



that sense in his houses. Here, as in most Arts and Crafts contexts, the past is a source both of inspiration and of association.

The last item in this catalog of Arts and Crafts taste is that it was reactionary, or antithetical. I mean that it reacted against the prevailing middle-class taste of its day. Arts and Crafts designers looked at what was in the shops and then went away and designed the opposite. The fashion in late-Victorian trade jewelry was for diamonds, which were discovered in large quantities in South Africa in 1868, and which became a symbol of wealth. They usually were mounted in fine gold settings with other pale stones, in designs which mimicked nature closely and whimsically—horses' heads, shamrocks, and so on. Figure 6 shows a necklace by the Arts and Crafts jeweler Fred Partridge. The design includes not diamonds but a mixture of semiprecious stones; not fine gold

settings but a setting of silver; not pale stones but color; and not mimicking of nature, but evocation. We can only understand this necklace fully when we put it in its antithetical context. It as much as statement as a necklace. It says, "I am not about money. I am about color, and craftsmanship, and art."

Now that we have traveled in both directions, what can we conclude? I cannot claim to have given you a coherent picture of the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain. I cannot reconcile splendor and simplicity for you, or explain why collaborative attempts at the Unity of Art did not come to much. I can only give you an interpretation of parts of this, to me, too rich and too loose phenomenon. But if there is a leitmotif running through what I have said, it is the sense of the Arts and Crafts as marking itself off, underlining its separateness from the world about it. We have seen this just now in the association of Arts and Crafts objects with the Romantic dream worlds of nature and the past, and in the antithetical approach. It also was implied in the big ideas at the beginning. It was an important part of the Unity of Art to be against professionalism. It was an important part of Joy in Labor to be against that dark, mythical, soul-destroying factory. And it was an important part of design reform to be against current commercial taste.

Up until now, I have concentrated on the basic premise of the Wolfsonian's inaugural exhibition, that design expresses ideas. But as it has turned out, I have also been discussing the central theme of the exhibition, modernity. You may wonder at my saying that, for I have not mentioned the word "modernity" since the beginning. That is because I have been talking about it in a negative sense. I have been talking about antimodernism, for that is, I think, the best general word for the inspiration which lay behind the turning away of the Arts and Crafts movement.

I see the Arts and Crafts movement as a late episode in the history of Romanticism. It upholds the imagination over reason, feeling over intellect, and the organic over the mechanical. Instead of the libertarian politics of a Rousseau or a Shelley, it tries to bring Romantic values to bear on the daily life of the working man. Now Romanticism was one, if not the principal, current of nineteenth-century antimodernism. Its values challenged the modernization of society in the nineteenth century—a developing economy, industrialization, the growth of cities, the dominance of the urban bourgeoisie, and secularism. Even democracy which it had originally championed it came to despise—in the London of Morris's *News from Nowhere*, the Houses of Parliament have become a dung heap. I would go further and say that Romanticism was antithetical to modernity; that it embodied values which were a necessary opposite to the rationalizing of society in Victorian Britain, as opposite and as necessary as sleep is to waking. Romanticism and modernity hate each other and need each other. Remember the quotation from William Morris with which I started. The Arts and Crafts movement

in Britain was simply a brave and slightly foolish application of the spirit of Romanticism to the everyday world of work, and it too was made up of hating and needing.

There remains the question of politics. I referred at the beginning to the link between the Arts and Crafts movement and socialism. Examples can be cited easily enough. William Morris, *the* leading member of the Arts and Crafts movement was a leading Socialist in the 1880s and early 1890s. A good number of his Arts and Crafts friends and associates were also Socialists, notably Philip Webb, the most revered Arts and Crafts architect. Walter Crane devoted his talents as an illustrator to the Socialist cause. And C. R. Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft was a brave and sustained attempt to create Ruskinian freedom in the workshop, inspired by Ashbee's concern for working men.

Does this mean that the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain was aligned with Socialism, that it was in some way left wing? That would be interesting for, if modern craft movements have had political affiliations, they usually have been with nationalism, as in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia at the turn of the century, or with the right wing, as in Germany and Italy in the early twentieth century.

I think that there was a sense of social responsibility in the Arts and Crafts movement, a sense of designing and making things in a spirit which did not take profit as its motive. But that is too vague a spirit to be identified with socialism. And the specific links with politics are not as close as they may seem at first sight. Morris's socialism was very real, and intimately linked with his work as a designer, but it was not the cause of that work. If anything, it was his work as a designer and the joy it brought him which led to his socialism. It would be truer to say that his politics was design inspired than that his design was politically inspired. And though Ashbee brought his social beliefs and his design work together in an impressive way, his links with political socialism were, at most, loose. His friend, Alec Miller, recalled "I know that he never was a member of any socialist group or organization, and I doubt if he ever gave a vote for Labor in a party election."<sup>6</sup>

And for every left-wing element in the Arts and Crafts we can cite a right-wing one. Against the profound socialism of Morris we can weigh the equally profound right-wing sentiments of Ruskin. The opening words of Ruskin's autobiography are: "I am, and my father was before me, a violent Tory of the old School."<sup>7</sup> Philip Webb's greatest building was a large country house called "Clouds." It was built for an aristocrat, Percy Wyndham, who made it a gathering place for right-wing politicians and intellectuals. In assessing the Arts and Crafts movement, should we not give as much weight to the Tory client as to the Socialist architect? And against the Romantic socialism of an Ashbee we can weigh the conservative individualism of a Voysey, who gave up reading one of

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6 In a letter to Nikolaus Pevsner, March 10, 1957; seen by the writer among Sir Nikolaus's papers in 1968.

7 John Ruskin, *Praeterita* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1949), 5.

Ashbee's books in disgust because its call for state protection of the crafts irritated him so much.<sup>8</sup>

I do not cite these right-wing examples in order to give you the impression that the Arts and Crafts movement was politically bland, indifferently right or left wing. It had a potential for political extremism: Morris the Marxist and Ruskin the furious Tory were both its mentors. And I think we can understand why this should be. The inspiration of the Arts and Crafts movement lay in the Romantic critique of industrial society, that is, in antimodernism. At its heart was the conviction that creativity can be a part of the lives of ordinary people. There was nowhere on the face of mainstream politics in the late nineteenth century where this critique, this conviction could take hold. The Arts and Crafts movement represented values for which politics had no place. It has no place for them today. But if you care about these things, the Arts and Crafts movement remains of abiding interest.

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8 In a letter, c.1910, to Arthur W. Simpson, in the possession of John Brandon-Jones.