

From Protest into Style: The Arts and Crafts Movement

Research Notes, May 20, 2014

*Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay;
Oliver Goldsmith, The Deserted Village, 1770.*

The Arts and Crafts Movement was the artistic consequence of the fundamental global change that we call the Industrial Revolution, which had begun in England in the closing decades of the 1700s when coal fired steam engines were applied to tasks previously done by hand and draft animals. In 1795, skilled weavers could earn 33 shillings a week at their hand looms. In 1815, their sons and daughters were being paid half of that. By 1840, their grandchildren's entire family needed to work in the mill or mines to earn 33 shillings a week. Children as young as four years old pushed coal carts down in the mines; seven year olds put in 15 hours a day in the cotton mills. Laissez faire capitalism was in full flower and European intellectuals were counting its human and environmental costs.

To designate an alternative economic order, the word "socialism" first appeared in English in 1827. In their search for alternative visions of the good society, thinkers like Karl Marx and Frederic Engels looked through the lens of evolution to a future classless society where the means of production were owned by the community as a whole. Others, particularly in the higher circles of Britain's intellectual elite, looked fondly back to the Middle Ages as a golden age worthy of recovery. The Arts and Crafts Movement was born in their work.

It began in the 1850s as a protest against the working conditions and environmental degradation being wrought on the green fields of England by industrialization. It evolved in the last half of the Nineteenth Century into an international art style based upon a set of principles taken up by three generations of artists, writers, architects, and craftsmen and women.

The Arts and Craft Movement took its name from the creation in 1887 of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in London. The movement flourished across several national and generational borders in a series of styles between 1850s and the 1930s. The development of international trade expositions and of illustrated arts magazines, new phenomena of the period, carried the movement's core ideas to an emerging global market. England led the way with designs that looked nostalgically back to preindustrial times. But other European countries and the United States developed its perspectives.

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Over its century of evolution, the several Arts and Crafts Movements went shared the common preferences for strong colors, fine materials, hand craftsmanship, historical, natural, and folk motifs, and unity of design. In sum, the Arts and Crafts Movement was a broad based and long lived era into which flowed a century of artistic achievement in architecture, paintings, sculpture, furniture, metalwork, jewelry, glass, ceramics, textiles, and graphics which were labeled, in turn, the Gothic Revival, Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the Aesthetic Style, the Mission Style, Art Nouveau, and Art Deco.

The men and women who led the Arts and Crafts Movement took inspiration from the writings of Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) who popularized the view that the green fields of England were decayed and her people degraded by the new industrial order and from August Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852) who maintained that medieval craftsmen were not alienated from the fruits of their labor, but took pride in its quality and in the aesthetically beautiful environment they produced.

John Ruskin (1819-1900) elaborated Carlyle's complaints and Pugin's ideal of a Gothic Revival into a moral imperative. The division of labor that powered factory production was, Ruskin argued, morally wrong because it diminished craftsmen into factory hands; despoiled the once beautiful natural and built environment; and, glutted the world with shoddy goods. That the art and architecture of a country reflected its moral character and determined what we now call its quality of life was the central insight on which the next generation created into the Arts and Craft Movement.

In 1851 London hosted one of the first world's fairs, the Great Exhibition, also known as the Crystal Palace. Its purpose was to display in all its great variety the technology, manufacturing prowess, and material blessings of the new economic order. One exhibit in particular, Pugin's Medieval Court achieved the contrary result for a small, but influential group of Oxford University undergraduates because it contrasted the quality and beauty of late Medieval material culture with the output of modern manufacturing.

Calling themselves the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, William Morris (1834-1896), Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), and Edward Coley Burne-Jones (1833-1898) shifted their focus from the social theory of their intellectual elders to aesthetics and the material environment. Their prized the joy of craftsman, natural materials, and art works rather than the reform of society.

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The 1860s and 1870s witnessed a flowering of design practices and craftsman groups reminiscent of guilds. Producers adaptively reused motifs from the vernacular design and from other cultures and other historical periods to produce a unified set of aesthetic standards across the disciplines. World fairs continued to globalize taste. Japanese folk art, for instance, was introduced into the stylistic catalogue after the 1862 London World's Fair.

Economic realities reshaped high ideals espoused by their teachers' generation away from social reform and toward decorative arts, although many still dabbled in reform. William Morris, for one, remained a socialist as well as a leading designer. Hand craftsmanship could not compete for a mass market, nor could a working class struggling to survive find resources to acquire or the leisure to appreciate fine design. Morris's generation of artists, architects, and designer continued to promote the goal of art "for the people and by the people," but they sold their work to the managerial and professional class.

The development of printing technology aided the international spread of the new design styles. Not only did hand printing and fine book binding become part of the roster of artistic undertakings, but magazine production, an innovation of the times, also spread images and ideas across national borders. As a result the Arts and Crafts Movement came to stress finely made furnishings, jewelry, glass objects, books, interior materials, and custom homes created for an elite consumers.

At the turn of the Twentieth Century, in the United States, a third generation of architects, designers, and artists linked Arts and Crafts aesthetics to reform politics through the concept of a designed environment. Cutting edge artists like Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), Gustav Stickley (1858-1942), and Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933) found customers in the middle class reformers, managers, and professional who called themselves the Progressives

Social and political reformers like Jane Addams, Theodore Roosevelt, and Louis Brandeis accepted the inevitability of capitalism, but not its collateral damage in stunted lives and degraded environments. Echoing the concerns voiced earlier by Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin, American Progressives attempted to apply human intelligence to the unintended consequences of economic change. They invented sanitary engineering, minimum age and maximum hour law, regulatory commissions, and national parks.

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Wright, Stickley, and Tiffany were, in effect, artistic progressives whose works embody Arts and Crafts design ideals. For Wright, unity of design across materials from fabric to furniture, furnishings, and interiors recalled William Morris's Pre-Raphaelite homestead, The Red House (1869). Stickley's Mission Style furniture factory successfully combined machine manufacturing methods for parts with use of skilled craftsmen to finish products. The result was well designed, stylish quality furniture that fit an American arts and crafts aesthetic, mixing Southwest Native American motifs with Colonial Spanish architectural elements. And in the work of Louis Comfort Tiffany and associates, we shall see guild workshops producing Arts and Crafts high styles in all their glory.

As the assorted Arts and Crafts Movements evolved successfully over three generations, here and in Europe, artists adjusted to a global economic paradigm shift. By moving from protest to the production of fine and decorative works, these creators adapted to the modern world as it came into being. As a whole, the Arts and Crafts Movement has bequeathed to us the continuing possibility of filling our lives and our material environment with beauty, quality, and great design.

Bibliography

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Remarks to Docent Meeting, June 2, 2014

My intention in these remarks is to sum up my research report which takes the long view and to leave you with some big ideas for our work as docents. Oliver Goldsmith's poem bears witness to a fundamental change in human and natural history so profound that it has been compared to the beginning of farming around 10,000 BCE. Around 1750 in England there began, contrary to the Book of Ecclesiastes, something new under the sun: the use of nonrenewable energy sources – fossil fuels, first coal, later, oil. This, we know, would have unintended consequences, which followed almost immediately.

Historians call this the Industrial Revolution; scientists have begun to label it the Anthropocene Epoch because human activity is changing the planet's atmosphere, weather patterns, flora, and fauna. The Arts and Crafts Movement was the English intellectual response to the dawning of the modern world that we homo sapiens created and inhabit today.

Homo sapiens translates as “wise man,” perhaps a premature characterization. There is another Latin phrase for us, homo faber: man the maker, we fabricate things; steam engines, power looms, spinning wheels and so on. In fact, our things are called artifacts, from two further Latin words: ars, artis – art, skill, design; and, facio, facere – to make, to create. As the Roman poet Varro explained: God made the country; man built the city.

The Arts and Crafts Movement became a broad intellectual persuasion from the 1850s to the 1930s that flowed across a broad range of artifacts from paintings and sculpture to houses, interiors, furnishings, fabrics, jewelry, to print and graphic design, over three generations of thinkers, authors, artists, architects, and craftsmen and craftswomen in Europe and the United States. While each particular phase had its own name, all shared common design elements. There remains a family resemblance from the Gothic Revival, to Art Nouveau and Art Deco.

Three particular points strike me as food for docent tours: (1): The Arts and Crafts Movement globalised through the fad of world fairs, those international expositions that took place every ten years or so between the 1851 Crystal Palace Exposition in London through 1928 Paris Exposition. In the US, we had expositions in Philadelphia, 1876; Chicago, 1893; St. Louis, 1904; San Francisco, 1915; and New York, 1939. Exhibits from different countries spread design and motifs around the art world.

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(2): The Arts and Crafts Movement was heavily influenced by changes in printing technology which further globalized international design via illustrated magazines and newspapers. For instance, the arrival of Japanese arts and crafts at the 1862 London exposition set in motion the fashion called japonisme in France (Japonism in English) that influenced fine and decorative art for the rest of the Nineteenth Century.

(3): The Arts and Crafts Movement sunk deep roots in American soil. John Ruskin's Two Paths, a primer on decorative arts, went through nineteen printings in the US before 1892. All of the institutional forms of the movement that were developed in England – art guilds, artist colonies, schools, and workshops – flourished here including William Morris Societies. Both Gustav Stickley's furniture factory and Louis Tiffany's glass works mass produced craftwork.

The Arts and Crafts Movement successfully adapted to the realities and rhythms of market capitalism. Handicraft production could not compete on price against machine powered manufacturing. English mills were able to import raw cotton from India and sell back to Indians cheaper than their wheels and hand looms could. Craftwork was simply cost prohibitive in the age of mass production, so it adapted. Sophisticated entrepreneurs, like Tiffany and Stickley blended factory principles (division of labor, standardization of product lines, etc) with machine tools to turn out luxury goods.

Indeed, in the early Twentieth Century, the brand name attached to craft products began to indicate well designed, beautiful, and more expensive objects. Tiffany was able to successfully sell lamps for \$750 per copy at a time when the average annual salary was \$1000. No wonder that named brand manufacturers like Ralph Lauren attach their corporate identity to Arts and Crafts era television series like *Downton Abbey* while the show's co-sponsor, Viking Lines, sells costly European river cruises.

The Arts and Crafts Movement blessed our Midwest with several remnants of its best work. Chicago and Grand Rapids are locations of fine homes that embody its spirit and its flesh. In fact, David Walcott Kendall (1851-1910), a contemporary of Louis Comfort Tiffany, became world renown as a designer of fine furniture in Grand Rapids. His widow established and endowed the Kendall School of Art in the family home in 1928. It offered a two-year course in art principles when it opened in the Kendall's former home on Heritage Hill in 1931. And, of course, the KIA's Kirk Newman school carries on the Arts and Crafts tradition in some of the very same media that the Movement popularized.