

# THE ARTS & CRAFTS MOVEMENT

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**F**ounded by theorists, architects and designers, the Arts and Crafts Movement had its origins in early Victorian Britain. It evolved during the second half of the 19th century, and was a response not only to Neo Classicalism but also, due to the effects of industrialisation, to the undermining of the craftsman.

The Great Exhibition of 1851 had made clear the extent of the debasement of English decorative art. Celebrated British artist and illustrator Walter Crane (1845–1915) said: 'The last stages of decomposition had been reached, and a period of perhaps unexampled hideousness in furniture, dress and decoration set in which lasted the life of the Second Empire, and fitly perished with it.'

It is often thought that the problem was solely due the use of machinery, but the reasons are far more complex. The issue had already been identified as early as 1835, when Parliament set up a Select Committee on Design, which found there was no formal educational system, and also a wasteful approach to design production. Manufacturers giving evidence to the Committee had stated that, in certain circumstances, up to 3,000 designs were produced and less than 500 used. Also, markets were flooded with lots of shoddy, poor quality goods, many of which would fail.

A.W.N. Pugin (1812–1852) had already argued for a return to craftsmanship and tradition. In *True Principles*, Pugin had written: 'The two great rules for design are these: 1st, that there should be no features about a building which are not necessary for convenience, construction or propriety: 2nd, that all ornament should consist of enrichment of the essential construction of a building.' He claimed that these same principles should be applied to all design.

Philosophy, therefore, was a prime influence in the Arts and Crafts Movement. John Ruskin (1819–1900) in his *Stones of Venice*—written in 1851, with his most important chapter on 'The Nature of Gothic'—advocated a return to the honesty of Gothic. He added that the only subject for ornament in nature was 'the expression of God's work in nature'. He did, however, disclaim any association with Pugin and his

'Catholicism', although both seem to share the same views as far as art was concerned.

Ruskin felt that a healthy and moral society needed workmen who were valued, skilled, and who took 'joy in their efforts'. He sought a more Middle Ages collaboration between masons and architects, and for craftsmen to design their own work, and painters to grind their own pigments – a sort of all-encompassing attitude to individuals' work, using local materials and vernacular styles.

Pugin and Ruskin were both of great influence to Arts and Crafts practitioners, especially for poet, artist and socialist reformer William Morris. Throughout his life he urged a return to the medieval traditions of design and craftsmanship, and the joy of the craftsman in the pursuit of his work. Like Ruskin, Morris lectured and agreed with many of the same ideals. He was energetic and enthusiastic, and with his gift for oratory he was able to influence these principles with great success.

Although the term 'Arts and Crafts' was coined to describe the movement as late as 1888 by Cobden-Sanderson (1840–1920), the well-known statement by Morris, 'Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful' (from his lecture 'The Beauty of Life', given in Birmingham in 1880)

encapsulates the philosophy of the Arts and Crafts Movement. William Morris was always regarded as a principal leader in the movement, although it was a status he never accepted.

In 1861 Morris founded Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co, a firm of interior decorators and manufacturers in Red Lion Square, Holborn, and later, in 1875, it became Morris and Company. Morris and his associates, like the architect Philip Webb, who had designed Red House for him in 1859, and painters such as Ford Madox Brown and Edward Burne-Jones, produced handcrafted metalwork, textiles, jewellery, wallpaper and books. 'The Firm' advocated a return to medieval craftsmanship, and was run as an artists' collaboration, with the artists providing designs for skilled craftsmen to produce.



17 Red Lion Square. In 1851 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, poet and painter, and from 1856 to 1859 William Morris, poet and artist and Sir Edward C. Burne-Jones, painter worked here. The landlord stipulated that the models were to be kept under 'gentlemanly restraint'.



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1. Armchair 1892-1904  
Traditional country chair. Possibly designed and made by Ernest W Gimson.
2. Decanter 1904-05. Hallmarked silver mount.  
Designed by C.R.Ashby. Made by the Guild of Handicrafts Ltd, Chipping Camden.
3. Covered bowl 1899-1900  
Designed and made by C.R.Ashby.
4. Table Glasses after 1862  
Probably designed by Philip Webb and made by James Powell and Sons, Whitefriars Glass Works, London.
5. Tapestry. Angeli Laudantes, 1894  
Designed by John Henry Dearle with figures by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones. Made by Morris & Co, Merton Abbey Tapestry Works.
6. Buffet 1871  
Designed by Francis Wollaston Moody, made by Gillow and Co. Ceramic panel based on a watercolour by Henry Stacy Marks, and painted by female students in the National Art Training Schools.
7. Sussex armchair  
Possibly designed by Philip Webb. Made 1870-90 by Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co, later Morris and Co.
8. Vase. Designed by Walter Crane in 1889. Made 1890-1901 by Maw & Co.
9. Tea kettle and stand. Designed by Christopher Dresser. 1880-90.
10. Table. Designed 1903; made 1905-06  
Designed by C.F.A.Voysey and made by F.C.Nielsen, London, with no nails or screws.

The Firm was also influenced by The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, originally established in 1848 as a secret society opposed to the Royal Academy and similar organisations whose ideals were exemplified by Raphael. They also disliked 'trivial' genres and believed that artists should treat subjects with maximum realism. Their subjects were mainly religious, but they also took inspiration from poetry and literature, especially relating to love and death. One of their chief proponents was Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who worked alongside Morris at The Firm.

Due to Morris's considerable influence, an interest in crafts had been gaining in popularity. Mostly led by upper and middle class women, social reformers and church officials, there was a thirst for maintaining or reviving regional crafts and helping the craft workers to pass on their skills. The Century Guild, a group mainly of designers, was founded by A.H. Mackmurdo (1851-1942) in 1882. He encouraged the finest of work building on the wide skills of its members. The *Hobby Horse* (1884, 1886-92), produced by the Guild, was the first literary journal advocating a design remit.

New arts societies were established, like the Art Workers Guild of 1884, founded by architects and designers who wanted to create a meeting place for both the fine arts and applied arts on an equal footing. However, the

Guild did begin as a male-only organisation, leading May Morris, daughter of William, to start the Women's Guild of Arts in 1907. It was not until the 1960s that women were admitted to the Art Workers Guild.

At the end of the 19th century, most design guilds and societies still prohibited the inclusion of women as full members. Although many women were art school trained, they were only expected to dally or pursue crafts appropriate to their gender, like textiles and pottery decoration. Until the 1890s, entry was restricted to those women who were related by birth or marriage to men in the professions. Bring on the Supremacists and the Bauhaus!

By the height of the movement at the turn of the 20th century, new links had been formed between craft and industry. It was realised that the two had to go hand in hand, as using the finest of material was expensive and unaffordable for most people. The ideal of a single person designing and making an object from start to finish was rarely a reality. Even William Morris had to accept that the 'help' of a machine was inevitable. Ultimately, it was the principles of reintroducing the concept of designer, architect and craftsmen to produce well-designed, affordable objects that held the movement together; an approach replicated both on the Continent and as far afield as America. ■