

Arts and Crafts: The Pursuit of Beauty and Functionality in the Twentieth Century

One hundred years after the death of William Morris it is a useful exercise to survey the European and American landscapes and take stock of the changes wrought in a century. While Morris's socialist dream of arts and crafts acting as a vehicle to bring about deep changes in society has not panned out the way he envisioned, and art and labor, for the most part, are still divided by a wide gulf, it is undeniable that in the course of a hundred years, the dangerous and degrading conditions in which workers virtually slaved away their lives in Morris's day have largely been eliminated, at least in the West. Sadly, millions of people are still employed in the production of useless items and the resulting waste would make Morris's head spin. And, notwithstanding his championing of handicrafts as a way to bring about the emancipation of the worker, it is largely due to the improvements in industry such as assembly line production, coupled with laws protecting the safety and rights of the worker that have resulted in these better conditions.

What is Morris's legacy? Happily it can be seen all around us today, from the enduring popularity of the designs Morris himself created, to the vibrancy of the Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe, America and such far-flung countries as Japan, and to the renewed appreciation for everything from Shaker furniture to hand-thrown pots to Navajo blankets. In this essay I will compare and contrast the relative merits of the production of goods by hand versus by machine, taking into account the effect on the producer as well as the user. In support of handicrafts, I will look at the views of William Morris and the potter Bernard Leach in England, and the founder of the Arts and Crafts Movement in Japan, Soetsu Yanagi. To illustrate the benefits of, and the inevitable move towards the mass production of goods, I will trace the twenty-year history of the Bauhaus in Germany, and the De Stijl Movement in Holland, and consider the contributions of designers such as Christopher Dresser and Charles Eames. Finally, I will provide my own thoughts on the improved sensibilities of the buying public in America, Europe and Japan.

The renewed interest in the architecture and artisan system of the Gothic era during the Victorian age was a direct result of the triumph of the Industrial Revolution and its attendant squalor, overcrowding, poor habitation and the creation of a large unskilled working class. Art and life had become separated by an unbridgable gulf. The appeal of the Gothic era, something Tolstoy found to be proof of its superiority over the Renaissance period, was that it was founded on the highest aspirations accessible to its age and that these were common to the entire people. Moreover, Victorians such as Morris and John Ruskin held that the Gothic was an example of art as the "expression of man's joy in labour." They read into the great cathedrals of the age evidence that the Middle Ages was a time of virtually no ugliness where craftsmen and artisans came together harmoniously to create works of utility and lasting beauty. The belief that this could be replicated and that arts and crafts could bring about a deep change for the better of society took hold.

The core philosophy in this as it pertained to the worker was outlined in Morris's essay, "Art and Socialism". Morris argued that "all men should have work to do which shall be worth doing, and be of itself pleasant to do..." Men would be restored to their humanity and dignity through work, and revel in the work itself. Soetsu Yanagi, a potter

in the early 1900s and one schooled in Christian mysticism, in Blake and Walt Whitman, took these ideas and fused them with those of Zen Buddhism to found the Japanese craft movement.

Yanagi recognized the drying up of the roots of folk art but believed that “our function at this stage in evolution is that of pilots employing intelligence with humility; thus emerging from isolation and joining hands in the good company of artisans.” He argued for a return to communal art and lamented the loss of faith in all but private interpretations of life’s meaning” (Leach 89). Yanagi pointed to examples of crafts from the European Medieval and Sung Chinese periods “in which, instead of individualist beauty, communal beauty pervades all.” He claims that, “In those epochs there was practically no ugliness,” and credits the guilds for allowing man to reach a “kingdom of beauty” on earth. Yanagi, like Morris and Ruskin, feels that the artist/craftsman serves as a bridge between the period he inhabits and the “next flowering of the art of the people,” but unlike his English predecessors he does not preach a “revolution against science and the machine” but instead seeks a “means of counterbalance by employing man’s first tools, his own hands, for the expression of his nature” (Leach 91).

The benefits of goods produced under such a system not only pertain to those who make them, but to those who use them. Unlike art, which Oscar Wilde claimed had absolutely no purpose and existed for its own sake, crafts “are never made for other than use; they are inexpensive; they are made in quantity sufficient to serve masses of people daily” (Yanagi 203). Further, whereas art is hung on a wall or placed on a shelf, “The special quality of beauty in crafts is that it is a beauty of intimacy” born of the daily use of the item. The very fact that crafts are handled and afford a tactile appreciation is key to their beauty.

A focus on beauty is all very well for the man of leisure and intellect, but how to obtain this ideal of craft in an increasingly mechanized world? Morris’s dream of workshops replacing the factories evaporated in the face of the sheer demand for goods. As early as 1860, the concept of design for mass production was being explored by men such as Christopher Dresser who applied his knowledge of botany to the fine arts and went on to open his own studio where he supplied designs for metal ware, ceramics, glass, tiles, textiles and cast iron furnishings to the most eminent manufacturers in Britain. In *Design of the 20th Century* authors Charlotte and Peter Fiell attribute his forward-looking designs to a “belief in industrial production and his pursuit of ‘Truth, Beauty, Power.’”

By the beginning of the twentieth century the limitations of utopian socialism and romantic medievalism were being underscored, too, by the success of the capitalist means of production in both meeting the demand for goods and improving the lives of the workers who produced them. As Frank Whitford points out in *Bauhaus*, in particular (Henry) “Ford’s company was demonstrating that some aspects of Utopia can become reality. His production-line automobiles realized the dream of large numbers of people to have freedom of movement at low cost, and at the same time improved the pay and living standards of the men who worked for him” (142). The author chronicles the changing attitudes towards machines in the period between the wars and the way in which “a capitalist utopia...had replaced a vaguely socialist utopia in which the machine was the enemy of the common man.”

Against this backdrop, and with socialist ideals of collectivism being realized through capitalist means of production, movements such as De Stijl in Holland and the Bauhaus in Germany were able to thwart the ominous forces of nationalism and conservatism long enough to see a marriage of the ideals of the crafts movements and those of the machine age. The achievement of De Stijl “in creating a collaborative, not to say collectivist, style in which variations introduced by individuals were reduced to a minimum” (Whitford 143) in many ways mirrors the aspirations of the founders of the arts and crafts movements for a return to a kind of guild system where egotism would be discouraged and where crafts created collectively would supercede those created individually. By the late twenties, Bauhaus founder and architect Walter Gropius moved the school in the same direction, defining it “not as a place where the old-fashioned crafts lived on in rejuvenated form, but where a new kind of industrial designer was being trained” (Whitford 164).

The marriage of craft and machines has proven to be a strong one, and its offspring has thrived in an age that has moved from industry to technology. With the rise of Fascism in Europe and the subsequent interruption of the modern movement there, the United States became the focal point for the continuing developments in both architecture and design. In the 1940s designers such as Charles Eames and his wife Ray Kaiser began to incorporate state-of-the-art manufacturing techniques in their “organic design” and apply them to the mass production of furniture. Their mission “to get the most of the best to the greatest number of people for the least” shows a philosophical debt to the Bauhaus and the De Stijl movement, and one likes to imagine that even Morris would have appreciated the concern these designers showed for improving society by designing functional but attractive items that improve the lot of the common man. As the Fiells say of the Eames’s in *Design of the 20th Century*, “Through their work they communicated the values of appropriateness, social morality, egalitarianism, optimism, informality, and dematerialism.” While the latter two values may be distinctly American and modern, surely Morris and Ruskin’s influence can be detected in the others.

Today the modern consumer would seem to have the best of both worlds. For those willing to spend a bit more, there is no shortage of opportunity to purchase high quality hand-crafted items. Arts and crafts fairs and small shops and galleries give individual artists the chance to market their wares; everything from ceramics, glass and metal ware to weaving, iron work and basketry is being created and helping to further blur the lines between craft and art. Publications such as *American Craft Magazine* and coverage in local newspapers and journals help to create a market for these items and allow a good number of craftspeople to make a living at their work. For people with more limited means, mass produced items of beauty, quality and originality can be found at any number of retail stores today and the proliferation of large stores such as Pottery Barn and The Great Indoors, with their clearly stated concern for style and modern design, do much to develop a sense of aesthetics in the masses. Moreover, globalization has allowed for a steady flow of hand-crafted items and goods produced in small workshops from developing countries to be sold at low prices in the industrialized world. With such choice today, it would be hard to take a solid stand in one court or another. While the hand dyed and stenciled remnant of pre-war Okinawan cloth I picked up in Japan is of unsurpassing beauty to me, as is a hand-thrown bowl from a potter in Bisbee Arizona, all I have to do is sit in this modern office chair at my mass-produced Ikea desk

to appreciate what modern design has meant in my own life. A world without either one would reflect only an incomplete idea of the human capacity for both beauty and functionality.

Works Cited

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