



Arts and Crafts Movement

by Roberto C. Ferrari

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As part of its reaction against the industrialism of the nineteenth century, the Arts and Crafts movement, which emphasized handcrafted decorative works of art and architecture, created medieval-type artists' guilds, which have been seen as homosocial.

The Arts and Crafts movement began in England in the 1860s and ended around 1920, having spread its influence throughout Europe and the United States. Famous Arts and Crafts artists and artisans include men as varied as Gustav Stickley, Louis Sullivan, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Louis Comfort Tiffany, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Gay and bisexual figures such as C. R. Ashbee and Edward Carpenter were also associated with the movement.

The Arts and Crafts Movement was a reaction to the overtly industrial society that was flourishing by the 1850s. The Great Exhibition of 1851 in London had demonstrated that England was the industrial leader of Europe. However, many observers, including art critic John Ruskin, believed that quality art and design were sorely lacking. In *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853), Ruskin railed against the industrial construction of furniture and everyday decorative objects because they lacked spirit and artistry.

The movement also had its origins in the love of Gothic and medieval culture that was part of Romanticism. The Pre-Raphaelite poets and painters looked back to Camelot and Chaucer for inspiration. Architects such as A. W. N. Pugin brought the Gothic revival to a new prominence in English architecture with his design for the Houses of Parliament. So inspired was the Arts and Crafts movement by the Gothic revival that it sponsored the creation of medieval-type artists' guilds to create works of decorative art.

At the heart of the movement was its reverence for handcrafted decorative works of art. It took as its chief artistic inspiration the world of medieval and Tudor England, and encompassed everything from furniture and wallpaper to tapestries and silverware. The focus was on simplicity of design with ornamentation for specific purposes only, as opposed to the random or excessive ornamentation typical of industrial objects. Furniture was streamlined, but wallpaper and fabrics were decorative.

Morris, Ashbee, and Artists Guilds

Although its ideology was often socialist, the Arts and Crafts movement was in many ways an upper-class trend, as few could afford one-of-a-kind decorative objects. Still, the socialist views of leaders such as William Morris, who established Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. in 1861, were expressed in their desire for art by the people and for the people.

Morris's company was one of the first companies to specialize in handcrafted decorative objects such as furniture, stained glass, and wallpaper. It was followed by numerous guilds and art societies that produced handcrafted arts. The two most famous London guilds were the Art Workers' Guild (1884) and the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society (1888). These particular guilds were dominated by men, but there arose other



This frontispiece from William Morris's book *News from Nowhere* (1893) reflects the Arts and Crafts movement's fascination with medieval culture.

guilds that not only employed women but were exclusively female-based.

Morris employed his female family members; and his daughter May eventually became head of his embroidery division. The Leek Embroidery Society (ca 1880) was an example of a guild of salaried women. These guilds today have been seen as homosocial, especially because the guilds involved workers in activities that went beyond work, including performing plays and holding social dances.

Such was the case of the Guild and School of Handicraft established in 1888 by C. R. (Charles Robert) Ashbee. Ashbee was heavily influenced by both Ruskin and Morris and is best known today for his designs in furniture, silver, and jewelry, as well as his Queen Anne domestic architecture.

Ashbee's interest in the men of his guild was personal as well as professional. He encouraged homosocial activities among the men. Although he was married and had children, he also had affairs with men. He was a friend and associate of the gay rights pioneer Edward Carpenter, who was also an apostle of the natural life.

The Arts and Crafts movement owes its success in many ways to two other nineteenth-century trends: Aestheticism and Art Nouveau. Aestheticism, which rose in popularity during the 1860s, encouraged the belief that one should surround oneself with beautiful art in order to become more refined. Art Nouveau was the French version of the Arts and Crafts movement in its celebration of purposeful decorative motifs for everyday household objects. In contrast to its British cousin, however, Art Nouveau was the first international commercial artistic fad, ultimately negating the Arts and Crafts movement because these works were often mass-produced.

The Arts and Crafts movement had a great influence on interior design, the aesthetics of home furnishings, and the production and conception of decorative objects as art even in an industrial age.

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