

Digging Beyond ‘Style’ BY TIMOTHY HOLTON

... a challenge for the Arts & Crafts Revival

“In making Craftsman furniture we went back to the beginning, seeking the inspiration of the same law of direct answer to need that animated the craftsmen of an earlier day, for it was suggested by the primitive human necessity of the common folk.” —GUSTAV STICKLEY ■

“The most important thing is sincerity. Once you learn how to fake that, you have it made.” —SAM GOLDWYN

FOR A PUBLICATION dedicated to the Arts and Crafts Movement, the first issue is an especially profound moment, for the movement itself was above all about getting back to first things, to fundamentals of life and art. The movement set out to scrape away the debased design of the times and return to the sound footings of utility, suitability, good materials and craftsmanship—the old “honest” approach before things went to hell in the industrial hand-basket. Laying the groundwork for his own publication, *The Craftsman*, Gustav Stickley directed his readers to the same bedrock concerns that informed his furniture designs. In his Foreword to the first issue, Stickley promised to examine historical roots of his ideals: “In a subsequent issue, the ‘Rise of the Guild System in Europe’ will be considered, with a maintenance of the ... point of view ... [of] ... art ... not as something apart from common and everyday existence, but rather as the very means of realizing life.”

His are phrases that take us to

first things, to not only the bases of art but to the basis of the Arts and Crafts Movement as a great social movement fed by tremendous passion and powerful vision: no less than the organized expression of a profound understanding of what makes us human beings.

A century after Stickley’s words expressed to Americans these stirring ideals of the English Arts and Crafts Movement, that great cause is enjoying what we call a “revival”—a phenomenon this publication aims both to reflect and to nurture. I have to admit to being a somewhat reluctant member of the Arts and Crafts Revival, seeing it as in constant danger of becoming a gutted shell of the original movement. An encounter that sticks in my mind was with the owner of a retail store specializing in Arts and Crafts furnishings who told me my prices were too high—an inescapable reality given the nature and scale of my small studio operation. “My customers aren’t worshippers. They just want accessories,” he told

me. Modern life has made us all leery of zealots. Yet to merely revive a period “look” is to argue, who cares if the stuff’s got no integrity, as long as it *looks* honest? My favorite example of the worst of the Arts and Crafts Revival is the fake through-tenon. The through-tenon became a hallmark of design reform furniture beginning with Pugin because it demonstrated integrity in craftsmanship. For many furniture makers, this mark of honest construction is regarded as a “look,” which they get by gluing a piece of wood to a member where the tenon would be (sometimes with the grain running in the wrong direction!).

Sam Goldwyn’s advice on the first problem of acting was fine for an art form devoted to illusion—if you can *look* sincere, the rest is easy. But we’re not dealing here with acting. We’re not dealing with set decoration. We’re dealing with the root concerns of life, which gave design reform its vitality. To a movement dedicated to “the very means of realizing life,” honest work is everything and good looks are the result. This moment, pausing at the launch of a publication devoted to the Arts and Crafts Revival, presents us with two roads: one is a revival of the movement’s substance and passion; the other is the revival of a period “look,” the general feel of the stuff the movement happened to produce with fading regard for integrity. Will the magazine promote substance and true

passion, or be just another example of one of modern life's dubious obsessions: style?

As I see it, in today's publishing market, style is the one fundamental problem *Arts & Crafts Homes and the Revival*, if it's going to start out on a solid foundation, must confront—with honesty. No doubt most folks browsing the newsstand and spotting this title among the shelter magazines will assume that it's dedicated to something they conceive of as a turn-of-the-last century *style*. This is no small problem for any publication truly devoted to a movement that not only sought to transcend style but also was deeply suspicious of the idea of style. For example, when asked what style his furniture was, Stickley would answer that it was in “no” style, that it transcended style. William Morris, who haunted the galleries of the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria & Albert) and its collection of artifacts from all over the world in search of simple beauty in handcraft, advised plainly, “Don't think too much of style.” In his wonderful *Houses and Gardens*, M.H. Baillie-Scott said it best:

To consciously aim at achieving “style” in design, either old or new, is to follow a Will of the Wisp. For the pursuit of style, like the pursuit of happiness, must necessarily lead to disappointment and failure. Both alike are essentially by-products, and the quality of the by-product is in direct ratio to the worthiness of the ideal pursued . . . [style] is a quality of the “flower of things” only to be gained by root culture, and he who aims at style is he who would paint the lily instead of watering it.

This moment of founding for an Arts and Crafts periodical is an

ideal time to remind ourselves that there is no such thing as Arts and Crafts style. There isn't even such a thing as Arts and Crafts design—unless you define it as the design that happened to be produced by members of the Arts and Crafts Movement. The movement's aims were far greater than that. “[W]hat I mean by art,” Morris explained in his lecture “Art: a Serious Thing,”

is not the prevalence of this or that style, not the laying on the public taste whether it will or not a law that such or such a thing must be done in art; . . . but rather a general love of beauty, partly for its own sake, and because it is natural and right for the dweller on the beautiful earth to help and not to mar its beauty, and partly, yes and chiefly, because that external beauty is a symbol of a decent and reasonable life, is above all the token of what chiefly makes life good and not evil, of joy in labour, in creation that is: and this joy in labour, this evidence of man helping in the work of creation, is I feel sure the thing which from the first all progress in civilization has been aiming at: feed this inspiration and you feed the flame of civilization throughout the world; extinguish it, and civilization will die also . . .

That is the substance and passion that drove the Arts and Crafts Movement and made it so much more than a design movement. Design, being an “external beauty [symbolic] of a decent and reasonable life,” is a worthy pursuit only insofar as it is an honest outgrowth of that wholesome life devoted to “helping in the work of creation.” It presents a challenge both daunting and thrilling for a magazine expected by the general market merely to satisfy an appetite for style.

We don't have to delve far into

the writings of the Arts and Crafts Movement to find that reformers' artistic goals were not to develop a style but to revive *the bases of design*. The term, in fact, provided the name of a book that could well and rightly be credited with being the single most important text on design to come out of the Arts and Crafts Movement. *The Bases of Design* by Walter Crane was first published in 1898, with at least five other editions or reprints through 1920. Article after lecture after essay in Victorian England decried the debased design of home furnishings and architecture: applied ornament, shoddy joinery, cheap materials, etc., etc. A big part of reforming design was defining the root and essential qualities of well-made buildings and the objects and furnishings used in them. As the president of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society and the premiere art educator in England in his day, Crane did just that in his book.

“LOOK, we just want furnishings and accessories to go in our Craftsman Bungalows,” I anticipate at this point hearing from my reader. But the appeal of Bungalows and their furnishings, the spirit that makes them such a fine refuge from the senseless chaos of modern life, is the fact that they are rooted in ancient building traditions, a love of nature, and the ordinary fellowship of home life. A new home built without these three concerns in the forefront, guided instead by merely an eye to style, will be a debased version of an Arts and Crafts home. Conversely, a house built with no self-conscious attempt at Bungalow style, inspired mainly by the triad of ideals above, will not only be true to Arts and Crafts ideals

but will, more importantly, be a *real house*. If we remain satisfied with looking at Bungalows from the relatively shallow standpoint of a historical style, abstracted not only from a deep vernacular tradition but also from the nature of materials and the building crafts, and from the particulars of use and site, then we'll end up gutting the Arts and Crafts legacy.

The Craftsman home is made of the most essential materials from the earth—primarily wood, brick and stone—built close to the earth, arranged to welcome and gather family and friends. We can best carry on its legacy by transcending matters of style and celebrating and cultivating the true bases of design. Even those who turn to these pages out of a simple interest in Bungalow accessories I believe do so out of a sense (sublimated though it may be) of the sound and wholesome view of the world that those accessories represent. They respond to the authenticity that infuses things made with genuine purpose and honest intentions.

But given that this is going to be a periodical in the contemporary mold, it's going to be about homes and their furnishings. So what root aims can we take from the movement that can define the scope of material to include in these pages? I propose that we begin with a renewed understanding of the movement as *a revival of the vernacular, or folk spirit*. This is an understanding that may not be evident on first reading of the Arts and Crafts Movement, but which becomes abundantly clear from studying its primary promoters. Certainly the message was clear to Gustav Stickley, as my opening quote from him shows. "We want a vernacular in art," wrote Walter Crane. "No mere verbal

or formal agreement, or dead level of uniformity but that comprehensive and harmonizing unity with individual variety which can be developed among people politically and socially free." The folk spirit, "The Collective Basis," was the subject of the concluding chapter of Crane's *Bases of Design*. My own favorite quote expressing the movement's vision is from the architect Philip Webb, who defined art as "folk instinct bubbling up from deep natural wells." Morris expressed this true, anciently rooted art as "popular art, the foundation on which all art stands," and the spirit of which is "the spontaneous expression of the pleasure of life innate in the whole people."

Morris's understanding of art as rooted in existential and universal human concerns is the opposite of the particular historical interpretation we've given the Arts and Crafts Movement. The arts (the *decorative* arts, but all the arts are to some degree decorative in origin)

are part of a great system invented for the expression of a man's delight in beauty: all peoples and times have used them; they have been the joy of free nations, and the solace of oppressed nations; religion has used and elevated them, has abused and degraded them; they are connected with all history, and are clear teachers of it; and, best of all, they are the sweeteners of human labour, both to the handicraftsman, whose life is spent in working in them, and to people in general who are influenced by the sight of them at every turn of the day's work: they make our toil happy, our rest fruitful.

PASSAGES LIKE THAT remind me of the universality of the Arts and Crafts

vision, and what a terrible failing it would be for us to reduce that vision to a relatively trivial preoccupation with period stuff and style.

Today's revival seems to me to be stuck in a gateway, enthralled with the beauty of the gateway itself but oddly reluctant to go through to the vast spectacular land that it leads to—the land of ancient arts and traditions, drawing continual vitality from nature, rooted in fundamental human needs and longings, the land of what Morris so plainly called "real art." Morris and Gustav Stickley are cases in point: for all their efforts in directing us to the elemental concerns of art, we remain transfixed by their own bodies of work.

It was always a danger that the movement would lose its way by allowing the aspect of design and craft so integral to the movement to become a distraction from the real mission. This is the concern C.R. Ashbee expressed so poignantly on a visit in 1915 (in the waning days of the original movement) to one American Arts and Crafts community, where he was charmed by the spirit and promise of his American hosts despite the shortcomings of their work, remarking

. . . the real thing is the life; and it didn't seem to matter so very much if their metal work was second-rate. Give them their liberty of production and they'll do it better. It's quite a simple proposition.

We cannot measure the out-put of these personal shops by the high standards of the best. That is what we in England have been doing, and have thus made of a great social movement a narrow and tiresome little aristocracy working with high skill for the very rich.

The real thing *is* the life; this is the soul of the movement, the legacy of this new publishing venture—a legacy that includes William Price’s magazine *The Artsman*, whose subtitle was “The Art that is Life.” Ashbee and Price remind us to be wary of too much connoisseurship, which easily drifts into the mindset of art-for-art’s-sake, which was anathema to Morris, Ruskin, et al, whose stance was art-for-life’s-sake. And their mission was to cultivate not simply good aesthetic taste, or appreciation for a few geniuses, but a broad, popular, common artistic vitality for all society.

Arts & Crafts Homes and the Revival has every claim to reach beyond the narrow and potentially banal concerns of a style magazine to address “the spontaneous expression of the pleasure of life innate in the whole people.” Of course this would mean in part recapturing the definition of popular art from current usage as art made for a mass market (primarily by giant media and manufacturing corporations), restoring its meaning to living traditions of widely practiced

human expression of the Art of man.” What about museums? “The True place of Art is in the service of everyday life,” he explained, “and beautiful furniture should be found fulfilling its function in the home rather than crowded in the museum, where the worship of its beauties becomes a kind of dilettante cult.” Arts and Crafts reformers teach us that modern conditions have eviscerated daily life by taking away the opportunities for art to flourish there. If it chooses to be satisfied with merely drawing attention to the products of the original movement’s practitioners, the Arts and Crafts Revival will do more to kill the movement’s spirit and substance than it will to revive it.

I have reached the conclusion that what we have come to call the Arts and Crafts Movement as well as the Revival is nothing less than the attempt to sustain the human spirit in the age of money and machines. It’s an expression of an irrepressible longing to put hand to nature, to celebrate the beauty of the world and our relationship with it. It’s the

craft? Will we cultivate a middle-class consumer niche, or resume the mission to reawaken the true art spirit grounded in “the primitive human necessity of the common folk?”

“THIS SOUNDS hopelessly delusional,” my cynical reader is saying. “Have you looked around you at the mountains of cheap stuff people can buy—a lot of it not half bad!—and expect Morris’s ‘popular art’ to have a fighting chance of competing with that? The market won’t have it! Besides, people don’t *want* to work, just ask them. Their lives are spent either avoiding or trying to escape from manual work.” True enough. But when we really understand what the movement was aiming at, none of that matters. The movement’s passion wasn’t an overbearing religious zeal, but a heartfelt longing to bring back the humble pleasure of life.

If most of what we make is debased and bankrupt from the standpoint of expressing the joy of life and labor, perhaps that is the most valuable lesson of all of the Arts and Crafts Movement. In the meantime, we can always provide at least some things for ourselves, as the most destitute in the world do; and in humble tasks heed the movement’s

reminder that approached with integrity, there is joy in work, and that what we gain in building our own houses or furniture, in making our own clothes, dishes, gardens, and so on is far greater than what we save by buying the things we need (yes, even when those things can be bought for less than the cost of materials).

I am somewhat reluctant to be a member of the Arts and Crafts Revival. “My customers aren’t worshippers,” a retail-store owner told me in an encounter that sticks in my mind. “They just want accessories.”

arts: art made not only *for* people but *by* people as well.

CAN WE REALLY do this within the walls of the Arts and Crafts home? Yes, as Stickley did in *The Craftsman*. The movement that gives this magazine its name was adamant about the place of art in daily life and the home. Bailie-Scott wrote that “the building and adornment of the house is surely the most important as well as the most

impulse to restore or retain a state of communion with each other—in part through our common history and traditions—and, perhaps most importantly, with the land we live on.

I want to emphasize the *vitality* implied by the idea of a true revival. This revival is in danger of being a debased version of a movement vociferously opposed to debased things. The question is, are we interested in set decoration or honest

And then there's Morris's beautiful sentiment:

Meanwhile, if these hours be dark, as, indeed, in many ways they are, at least do not let us sit deedless, like fools and fine gentlemen, thinking the common toil not good enough for us, and beaten by the muddle; but rather let us work like good fellows trying by some dim candle-light to set our workshop ready against to-morrow's daylight—that to-morrow, when the civilised world, no longer greedy, strifeful, and destructive, shall have a new art, a glorious art, made by the people and for the people, as a happiness to the maker and the user.

So what if Morris's tomorrow never comes? Let's not be distracted by what may strike us as naïveté . . . the point is that dim candlelight. That is not something to sneer at. Because it's the pleasure of life. ■

TIMOTHY HOLTON *lives in Berkeley, Calif. He and the staff at his nationally renowned picture framing shop, Holton Studio Frame-Makers in Emeryville, Calif., design custom framing and make all the frames by hand. He welcomes your thoughts and comments: info@HoltonFrames.com*