

History of Architecture

How did Morris define the “machine age” of production, in opposition to the way things were made in previous ages? What does he believe are the artistic and social implications of this new system? Do you see any parallels in today’s design world?

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Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, design was focused on the experience of modernity. The Arts and Crafts movement was a rebellion against machines and mass production because they were seen as a power that was going to take over the arts. “The Arts and Crafts was a movement and not a style. It had little concern for formal relationships, and advocated no specific vocabulary or form. It was an attitude, an approach to a problem that demanded simplicity, elimination, and respect for materials” (Brooks 1971, 312). The leading figure of the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain was William Morris, who was also a leading Socialist in the 1880s and the early 1890s. He dedicated his life to the idea that art could improve the lives of ordinary people, which translated into the primary focus of Arts and Crafts ideas—personal experience. Through the unity of art, joy in labor, and design reform, the Arts and Crafts movement aimed to project creativity into the lives of ordinary people at work, and not just artists.

The people of the arts and crafts movement opposed the type of hierarchy that was persistent among their society, which was set in late Victorian Britain. Decorative artists were viewed at the lowest level of the hierarchy, automatically branding them with a low artistic and professional status. Architecture also had a low artistic perception, however it still maintained a positive professional status. Painting and sculptures were the only forms regarded as fine arts. The movement declared that this hierarchy had not existed in the past, and that in the present day, all forms of ‘art’ should be regarded as equal (Crawford 1997, 16).

Since William Morris was a leading socialist, the arts and crafts movement could be said to have been linked with politics. The idea of joy in labor, or the creative satisfaction that comes from ordinary work, was first linked to John Ruskin in his long passage entitled, “The Nature of Gothic.” In it, Ruskin describes the details and the history behind the Gothic buildings of Venice.

He imagined the workmen taking their time allowing their imagination to produce rough and vivid designs that were carved into the buildings. The freedom that these workers enjoyed shed light for Ruskin on a much larger issue within workers in modern factories (Crawford 1997, 18). Ruskin urged each worker to achieve creative freedom, but warned them that if not, “then all their precious 19th century rights, their votes, their democratic freedoms, are worse than medieval slavery” (Crawford 1997, 18). To Ruskin, even if a man is being held under political tyranny, he is still considered free, as long as he has creative freedom. Working in factories, on the other hand, pulls the human intelligence out of the workers, and they eventually become slaves to the machines (Crawford 1997, 18).

William Morris pursued his passion of improving ordinary life through art by introducing the concept of design reform within the arts and crafts movement. Design reform aimed to improve the design of everyday manufactured objects that were consumed by the public. Two of the leading design reformers of the mid-Victorian times include Henry Cole and Richard Redgrave, both of whom established the first national system of art education in Britain. This was called “the South Kensington system” and was set up in hopes of improving the standards of design within manufacturing in Britain (Crawford 1997, 19).

The arts and crafts movement in Britain had implications for this new system of unity of arts, joy in labor, and design reform. In 1884, the Art Worker’s Guild was established in the hopes that the profession of architecture would not be shaped by modernization, and would remain as an art. The group of architects, who set up the Art Worker’s Guild privately and under the banner of the Unity of Arts, used this space to associate themselves with other artists, painters, and sculptors. They wanted to completely eliminate their associated reputation with lawyers and local government officers (Crawford 1997, 16). This led to other architects to make rash and

harsh decisions about metropolitan city life. In 1894, Ernest Gimson and Ernest and Sidney Barnsley, a group of architects, left the city to live in a remote rural area known as the Cotswolds. Their isolation from their previous life was a reaction to the overwhelming paperwork and professionalism of practice in the city. These three architects, who could also be called craftsmen, continued working more intimately on local buildings, and even set up workshops to produce plasterwork, metalwork, and furniture. Despite the fact that the Art Workers' Guild grew to become the central organization for Arts and Crafts in London, its ideas and implications did not have a lasting effect on design of objects or building, mostly because its members were largely individualists (Crawford 1997, 17).

William Morris's idea of creative satisfaction, or creative freedom, was to a great extent based on the design of objects whose appearance presented itself as handmade. These suggestions can be seen through "hammer marks on metal work, the fluid, irregular contours of some pottery and glass, and the marks of the adze or chisel on wood or stone" (Crawford 1997, 18). However, the true significance behind this freedom lay in the fact that it "served as myths of personal endeavor" (Crawford 1997, 18). According to Morris, working in a dark and mythical factory for days on end, while working with the same machines everyday, destroyed the souls of the workers. It made them realize the beauty and joy behind working with their hands. The boring repetition of work in the factories allowed the workers to appreciate the freedom that also accompanied handwork. The arts and crafts movement only addressed this idea to trades where factories were in the decorative arts, which included architecture, furniture, metalwork, textiles, pottery, stained glass, and certain kinds of printing (Crawford 1997, 18). The author of "Ideas and Objects: The Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain," Alan Crawford, believes that joy in

labor did not fulfill its aim to change society, but rather gave the decorative artists the opportunity to continue doing what they were already doing.

The designers behind the arts and crafts objects and buildings aimed to improve overall design of their work, and generally categorized it using terms such as ‘honesty’, ‘simplicity’, and ‘the nature of materials.’ The 72-3 Cheyne Walk house by C.R. Ashbee (fig. 1) is a strong example of a work that is defined as honest in that it expresses the function and purpose of the building without pretense. However, the arrangement of the house on the inside goes completely against this idea of ‘honesty’ if you “compare the elevation with the cutaway drawing, you will see that it does not express the internal arrangement at all; if anything it belies it” (Crawford 1997, 16). This signals that these words can only be embodied in complex and contradictory ways. Design reform also prompted the establishment of art schools which “served a single program: the simplicity of working by hand lent itself to educational purposes while... national and local government used the schools to improve the standard of design in local trades as a way of improving economic performance” (Crawford 1997, 19). The schools began in the 1880s and 1890s and offered classes in decorative arts, but only if they were relevant to local trades. An example of this can be seen in Birmingham and its establishment of the Birmingham Municipal School of Art in 1885. The reason for the establishment of an art school was because the economy was heavily dependent on decorative metalwork and jewelry, and it was able to satisfy the commercial concerns of the Birmingham council. These are the artistic and social implications that William Morris believed to be at the base of the new system which was against machinery (Crawford 1997, 19).

In Frank Lloyd Wright’s *The Art and Craft of the Machine*, he outlines his reasoning behind the belief that the future of art lies in the machine, while also criticizing Morris for believing

otherwise. Wright says that Morris “plainly foresaw that a blank in fine art would follow the inevitable abuse of new found power, and threw himself body and soul into the work of riding it over by bringing into our lives afresh the beauty of art as she had been” (Frank Lloyd Wright 1901, 77). Morris aimed to create a society where artists and craftsmen could work together, where the creative satisfaction of ordinary work existed, and where manufactured objects were better and art educational systems were established in the hopes of extinguishing the overruling power of the machine.

This issue of the hand versus machinery is still respectively significant within today’s design world. A direct parallel to the issue outlined between William Morris and Frank Lloyd Wright could be the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute Gala, or the Met Ball, of 2016. The gala is an annual fundraising event for the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute, and marks the grand opening of the annual fashion exhibit that the institute holds. This year, the theme of the gala was *Manus X Machina*, which translates into hand versus machine. The exhibition is an exploration of how fashion designers are using handmade and machine-made options to create haute couture and ready to wear pieces. The main garment of this exhibition is the Chanel Wedding Ensemble (fig. 2), which “exemplifies the confluence of the hand and the machine. Made from scuba knit, a synthetic material, the dress is hand molded, machine sewn, and hand finished” (Met Museum 2016). Haute couture pieces are usually handmade and have very delicate details, resulting in a very limited production and intended for specific clients. Ready to wear pieces are usually produced for the general public and are produced by machines. The exhibition showed pieces that dated from the early twentieth century to the present, and represented the founding of haute couture in the nineteenth century, when the machine and concept of mass production was originated. It also explores the same theme

that Frank Lloyd Wright explored within his essay, which is that the hand and machine are both tools in the creative process and the distinction between them is up to the artist.

William Morris was a passionate advocate and leader for the Arts and Crafts movement within Britain, and wanted to stop the development of the machine and mass production. He defined the “machine age” of production through the aims that outlined the movement; equality between work divisions, creative satisfaction and freedom within ordinary working days, and lastly improving the design of manufactured objects and establishing educational systems of art. The artistic and social implications of this setting include the establishment of guilds versus moving to the countryside, imperfections and irregularities becoming a part of the design of handmade objects, the formation of art schools, and the concepts of ‘honesty’, ‘simplicity’, and ‘the nature of materials’ dominating the design style. In this day and age, it is very possible that the machine will continue to develop technologically and eventually surpass the capabilities of human handwork by a much larger extent than it already does. It is for this reason that we must cherish the delicacies that come with handwork, as well as accept the endless possibilities that the machine provides for the artist. We must learn to see the beauty in both, just as Karl Lagerfeld was able to do with his wedding dress at the 2016 Met Gala. This issue of handwork versus the machine originated from the late nineteenth century, and it is still an ongoing design complexity that is still prevalent today.

Appendix

Figure 1

72-3 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, London by C.R. Ashbee



Figure 2

Chanel Wedding Ensemble by Karl Lagerfeld



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