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book review of

*The Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe and America: Design for the Modern World, 1880-1920* by Wendy Kaplan

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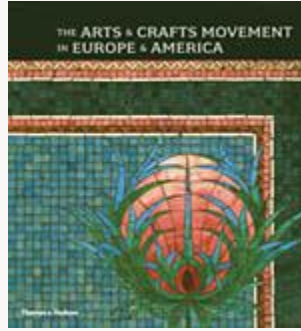
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The Arts & Crafts Movement in Europe & America, 1880-1920: Design for the Modern World

Wendy Kaplan

With contributions by: Alan Crawford, Rüdiger Joppien, Juliet Kinchin, Amy F. Ogata, Elisabet Stavenow-Hidemark, Christian Witt-Dörning, and foreword by Andrea L. Rich.  
New York: Thames and Hudson, in association with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2004

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Exhibition Itinerary

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 19 December, 2004 , 3 April, 2005

\*Delaware Art Museum, 17 June, 2005 , 11 September, 2005 (planned venue)

\*Milwaukee Art Museum, 19 May, 2005 , 5 September, 2005 (actual venue)

The Cleveland Museum of Art, 16 October, 2005 , 8 January, 2006

In twenty-first century parlance, the label "Arts and Crafts" has come to bear several popular meanings. For the 'average Joe', the phrase might conjure up memories of industrial arts class on junior high afternoons, mission furniture at grandma and grandpa's bungalow, or trips through such home décor chains (and mail-order catalogues) as *Restoration Hardware* and *Pottery Barn*. While such random flashings through the mind's eye may not seem particularly scholarly, when pared to their cores, they run parallel to issues with which historians of the Arts and Crafts movement grapple in somewhat more abstract terms, "Arts and Crafts" an activity, a way of life, or an aesthetic style? Is it truly "Arts and Crafts" if it meets only one of these qualifications in defiance of the others, or must it possess all three to qualify as genuine, authentic, and artistically admirable? Two current exhibitions, *The Arts & Crafts Movement in Europe & America, 1880 -1920: Design for the Modern World*, which opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) on 19 December, 2004, and *International Arts and Crafts*, which opened at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London on 17 March, 2005, offer the general public and scholars alike an opportunity to contemplate the historical roots of such issues for the first time within the reconstructed context of the international Arts and Crafts movement. While these two exhibitions have spurred considerable dialogue, this review is not intended to address either exhibition, but rather to evaluate the usefulness of the catalogue, *The Arts & Crafts Movement in Europe & America*, as a permanent record of the exhibition organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

While a handful of exhibitions in Europe and America have sought to reconstruct and examine various aspects of the Arts and Crafts movement, until the present, the scope of these exhibitions has been limited to monographic studies of seminal figures within the movement, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum's show on William Morris held in 1996, or to specific geographic regions, such as the two definitive exhibitions on the American Arts and Crafts movement, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America 1876-1916*, organized in 1972 by the University of Princeton Art Museum in conjunction with the Art Institute of Chicago, followed in 1987 by, *The Art that is Life: the Arts and Crafts Movement in America 1875-1920*, organized by Wendy Kaplan at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Recognized as one of the foremost authorities on the Arts and Crafts movement, Kaplan has gone on to dedicate two decades of research, writing, and exhibition activities to broadening the understanding of this artistic and social movement; and it is her vision and effort as department head and curator of decorative arts at LACMA, supported by the generosity and enthusiasm of the show's primary sponsor, Max Palevsky, that have culminated in the present exhibition and accompanying catalogue, which is reviewed here. Incorporating essays by an impressive international group of scholars, *The Arts & Crafts Movement in Europe & America* analyzes thirteen countries, chosen by Kaplan as "most representative" (11) of the international Arts and Crafts movement: England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Belgium, France, and the United States. Eight chapters, organized by geographic locales, draw upon fresh research to provide insight into the socio-historical context of the development of the movement in each center, while simultaneously contributing to the examination of three overarching themes of enquiry: art and industry, design and national identity, and art and life (10-19). Rather than proceed chapter by geographic chapter through the catalogue, this review will focus upon the degree to which the authors have met with success in pursuing a discussion of these established issues within the context of the international Arts and Crafts movement.

### **Art and Industry**

In introducing the relationship between the uneven sprawl of the Industrial Revolution and the development of the Arts and Crafts movement as one of the catalogue's leitmotifs, Kaplan advances a fairly bold thesis.

"The Arts and Crafts movement, in large part, was neither anti-industrial nor anti-modern. While its adherents idealized the pre-industrial past, they did not reject the present. Even in the 1840s, the Gothic Revival architect A.W.N. Pugin stated, 'We do not want to arrest the course of inventions, but to confine these inventions to their legitimate uses.' Later, this viewpoint would be echoed by Arts and Crafts leaders in Britain (with the notable exception of John Ruskin). They believed that machines were necessary but should be used only to relieve the tedium of mindless, repetitive tasks" (11).

Alan Crawford, the author of the succeeding chapter concerning the origins and development of the Arts and Crafts movement in the United Kingdom, however, pointedly brings this claim into question. Expounding upon the ideology of the British Arts and Crafts movement, Crawford insists not only that, "anti-modernism runs deep in the Arts and Crafts" (64), but also that, "the most obvious characteristic of the British movement seems to be its anti-industrialism" (66). While Kaplan and Crawford seem to be at cross-purposes on the points of anti-modernism and anti-industrialism, their differences can perhaps be

accounted for by the fact that the parameters of the catalogue encompass four decades, 1880-1920, of which Crawford writes concerning the earliest period, and perhaps the most idealistic figures.

Rüdiger Joppien's essay on Germany, Amy F. Ogata's article on Belgium and France, and Kaplan's article on America, each offer compelling evidence in support of Kaplan's premise that, particularly by the turn of the twentieth century, the machine was viewed by adherents of the Arts and Crafts movement as an invention that could be utilized to assist human creativity rather than to limit it. The primacy Morris placed on "pleasure in labour" (27) had logically resulted in the conundrum of the impossibility of adequately compensating artisans for their time and efforts, while simultaneously making art accessible to all. Unwilling to choose between the dichotomy of pure artistry or mindless industry, these authors argue that Arts and Crafts producers began to look for ways to be industrious, increasingly replacing the concern about joy in labor with a concern for improved working conditions, and joy in consumption. In Germany, Joppien discusses the search for conciliation between accessible design and economic feasibility, focusing especially on the development of *Typisierung* (standardization) and the production of *Maschinenmöbel* (machine made "designer" furniture), a mode of arts and crafts production similarly discussed by Juliet Kinchin regarding the collaboration of Pál Hóti, a major Hungarian designer, with two Midwestern American furniture producers. It is Kaplan's own essay on the democratization of design in America, however, that goes the furthest to illustrate that major designers accepted machine assistance in order to enable affordable production. Kaplan cites written evidence, such as Frank Lloyd Wright's lecture, "The Art and Craft of the Machine," delivered at the Chicago Society of Arts and Crafts in 1901, in which, after invoking the name of William Morris, he went on to declare: "The machine, by its wonderful cutting, shaping, smoothing, and repetitive capacity, has made it possible to so use it without waste that the poor as well as the rich may enjoy today beautiful surface treatments of clean, strong forms" (273-74). Kaplan also points to such circumstantial evidence as William D. Gates's willingness to mass produce molded ceramics at Teco Art Pottery, while choosing to locate the factory within a bucolic rural setting where, in the words of *The Studio*, "the artists are in close communion with nature" (282).

Once started, however, the path toward the popularization of Arts and Crafts proved to be a slippery slope leading to a proliferation of low-quality kitsch, and, as Kaplan discusses, the dilution of a number of the most important tenets of the original Arts and Crafts movement. As the demand for the Arts and Crafts look increased, so did the willingness of producers to retain only the surface style, abandoning the design and construction philosophy in the production of such imitations of handcraftsmanship as Liberty & Co. Tudric ware and Sears Roebuck's imitation Craftsman furniture.

### **Design and National Identity**

Discussion of Romantic Nationalism is, unsurprisingly, featured most prominently in the chapters concerning Hungary, Norway, Finland, Germany, and Belgium, countries which were struggling for sovereignty or which had only recently achieved nationhood. The specific manners in which the Arts and Crafts were used in the service of nationalism, however, take on different narratives in each chapter. In her superb essay on the shaping of a national consciousness in Hungary, Juliet Kinchin discusses the urban bourgeoisie's

embrace of a strong surviving culture of folk traditions in rural Hungary, propping it up as pure Hungarian art, untainted by Ottoman and Hapsburg "contamination" (114). Such sponsorship of traditional rural crafts came to be viewed particularly by wealthy, upper-class women as a "philanthropic" activity; however, both in Hungary and Ireland, as discussed by Crawford, this philanthropy inevitably led to a scenario in which the urban elite benefited more from the enjoyment of the craftwork they supported than did the workers they patronized. In addition to what could skeptically be called philanthropic activities among the rural poor, the catalogue also discusses the emergence of an industrial arts educational system, particularly in Germany and Hungary, in which state-sponsored efforts were made to educate rural craft workers on the modernization of the crafts, bringing traditional folk art under the rubric of design reform.

Arts and Crafts employed in the service of national pride are also discussed at length by the catalogue's authors. In his essay on Germany, Joppien points out that the young nation's desire to strive for economic supremacy was a crucial factor in the nation's support of design reform, perhaps even exceeding its desire for a development of a national style. Joppien focuses particularly on industrial arts education, and competition at international exhibitions, arguing that such institutions successfully brought the German Arts and Crafts movement largely under the "considerations of cultural and mercantile politics" (107). Joppien also convincingly argues, however, that Germans did wish to assert a style of their own, having long felt unduly influenced by their neighbors. The stark lines of German *Jugendstil*, Joppien argues, were in perfect opposition to the florid lines of Rococo France, a dominant outside influence that many designers wished to purge from the newly unified nation. In her essay on Scandinavia, Elisabet Stavenow-Hidemark similarly highlights the popularity of the 'dragon style' in Norway, as the country valorized its Viking past as it struggled to come out of the shadow of Denmark and Sweden.

### **Art and Life**

In his essay on the development of the Arts and Crafts movement in England as a foundation from which the international Arts and Crafts movement will launch, Crawford makes an important distinction by setting up Ruskinism and design reform as two separate and distinct discourses. In the "theory of everything" search to find one catch all definition to succinctly describe a style, it can be easily forgotten that a movement can contain many competing impulses, and the distinction the catalogue draws between utopianism and pure design reform is an essential point to make. While some members of the Arts and Crafts movement were concerned with elevating the station of the craftsworker, and yet others were concerned with bringing the Arts and Crafts under the service of nationalism, many designers were concerned primarily with issues of taste. In his analysis of the development of the Arts and Crafts movement in Germany, Joppien specifically addresses this, writing, "The leaders of the new movement in Germany, including designers, artists, architects, patrons, critics, and businessmen, wanted not only to transform the appearance of the products they created but also to improve the taste of the entire population" (73). In his essay on the Arts and Crafts movement in Austria, Christian Witt-Dörning similarly argues that major Austrian figures such as Josef Hoffmann were less concerned with instituting social change than they were with accomplishing design reform as it related to the appearance of things. Kaplan's own essay on the Arts and Crafts movement in America especially focuses on the integration of art with life, in line with the German concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, life as a total work of art. While Kaplan discusses the embrace of the

concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* particularly in regard to the designs of Frank Lloyd Wright, the catalogue overall lacks an adequate discussion of the importance of this concept to the international Arts and Crafts movement and of the dissemination of it through the exhibition of plans and model rooms.

While the moral imperatives of Ruskin and Morris accompanied the spread of Arts and Crafts to many countries, Amy F. Ogata argues that in France, as in Vienna, the British Arts and Crafts movement was regarded primarily as an aesthetic theory rather than an idealistic philosophy. Writers such as Violet-le-duc, Ogata argues, valued such qualities in British Arts and Crafts as comfort and "rustic simplicity" (226).

### Conclusion

*The Arts & Crafts Movement in Europe and America* is a catalogue that attempts to get beneath the surface of objects that at first appear incredibly simple and direct, but which are heavily ideologically laden, and which cannot be entirely disassociated from the socio-historical mesh within which they were produced. The catalogue falters in only two regards. First, its role as a catalogue to visually document objects from the exhibition does not always coincide optimally with its goal to provide fresh research and analysis. Illustrations, although vaguely referenced in the text, often seem inserted as an afterthought, rather than as integral components of the text. Juliet Kinchin's remarkable essay on Hungary, however, is a notable exception to this, and succeeds in evading this sense of disjointedness between text and image. Secondly, while the catalogue is indexed and thoroughly footnoted, it sadly lacks a bibliography documenting the scholarship to which it contributes and suggesting to the interested reader further sources to consult.

Overall *The Arts & Crafts Movement in Europe & America* is a comprehensive addition to the body of scholarship on the Arts and Crafts movement. It can be consulted not simply as a record of catalogued items in an exhibition, but as an important study of various ways in which design reform intimately commingled at the turn of the twentieth century with social and political reform. It is comprehensible, yet nuanced, useful to the scholar and accessible to the lay reader. In addition to the role of industrialization, nationalism, and design concerns in relation to the development of the international Arts and Crafts movement, Kaplan also successfully takes on questions of class and consumption, joy in labor versus fair compensation, elitism versus popularization. As LACMA's director, Andrea L. Rich, writes in the forward, the catalogue succeeds in presenting this study of the international Arts and Crafts movement as, "a framework for many essential issues still being debated today, the conflict between standardization and individuality, the question of whether a unique handcrafted object is superior to a mass-produced one, the problem of defining what kind of design most benefits society" (7). *The Arts & Crafts Movement in Europe and America* is not merely a guide through an exhibition or a coffee table souvenir of a show, but endeavors and succeeds at making a serious contribution to scholarship on the understanding of the many transmutations of Arts and Crafts ideology and style throughout Europe and America.

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