

Aesthetic Movement and the Arts and Crafts: Friends or Foes?

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Introduction

Promoting principles of Art increases awareness that art is important in all areas of life, which in turn helps to promote the worth of an object as deriving from its intrinsic beauty instead of its associations (Harwood,2012,p.515). By the 1880s, the Aesthetic Movement begins to move in other directions, such as the Arts and Crafts Movement and Art Nouveau. However, discussions about beauty and the pursuit of excellence in design continue long after the Aesthetic Movement declines and its ideas influence subsequent movements (Harwood,2012, p.515).

Aesthetic movement

During the mid-19th century, the provocative and sensuous Aesthetic movement threatened to dismantle Britain's fussy, overbearing, and conservative Victorian traditions (The aesthetic movement,4 March 2023,www.theartstory.org). More than a fine art movement, Aestheticism penetrated all areas of life - from music and literature to interior design and fashion. At its heart was the desire to create "art for art's sake" and to exalt taste, the pursuit of beauty, and self-expression over moral expectations and restrictive conformity(The aesthetic movement,4 March 2023,www.theartstory.org). The freedom of creative expression and sensuality that Aestheticism promoted exhilarated its adherents, but it also made them the object of ridicule among conservative Victorians. Nonetheless, by rejecting art's traditionally didactic obligations and focusing on self-expression, the Aesthetic movement helped set the stage for global, 20th-century modern art (The aesthetic movement,4 March 2023, www.theartstory.org).

Aesthetic artists touted the adage "art for art's sake," divorcing art from its traditional obligation to convey a moral or socio-political message (Jeffrey Easby,2023, www.khanacademy.org).

The Aesthetic Movement provided a challenge to the Victorian public when it declared that art was divorced from any moral or narrative content (Jeffrey Easby,2023, www.khanacademy.org). In an era when art was supposed to tell a story, the idea that a simple expression of mood or something merely beautiful to look at could be considered a work of art was a radical idea (Jeffrey Easby,2023, www.khanacademy.org). However, in its assertion that a work of art can be divorced from narrative, the ideas of the Aesthetic Movement are an important stepping-stone in the road towards Modern Art (Jeffrey Easby,2023, www.khanacademy.org).

The Great Exhibition of 1851 marked a turning point for the visual arts in Britain (The aesthetic movement,4 March 2023,www.theartstory.org). Although the event showcased important recent innovations, including the new medium of photography, much of the work on display conformed to the fussy and shallow design style of the Victorian era (The aesthetic movement,4 March 2023, www.theartstory.org). Worse still was the mechanization of the creation process, which according to famous critic John Ruskin, meant the dehumanization of design (The aesthetic movement,4 March 2023,www.theartstory.org). These predictable, repetitive designs coupled with the strict Victorian standards for art that placed greater importance on the moral message conveyed than quality of the work fostered a stifling environment from which many artists were desperate to escape (The aesthetic movement,4 March 2023,www.theartstory.org). Shortly after the Great Exhibition concluded, a group of artists went about creating a new and simpler aesthetic - one inspired by the intricate detail and intense colors of medieval art and design (The aesthetic movement,4 March 2023,www.theartstory.org). Art of the so-called Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood gained popularity by the 1860s thanks in part to favorable reviews by John Ruskin (The aesthetic movement,4 March 2023, www.theartstory.org). The group split thereafter when younger artists, including William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, joined Dante Gabriel Rossetti to create a "Cult

of Beauty," laying the foundation for Aestheticism. Rossetti's sensual portraits of unconventionally beautiful women with large eyes and flaming red hair adorned in loose, flowing gowns introduced a new ideal for feminine beauty that challenged Victorian associations between non-corseted, red-haired women and sexual licentiousness; and eventually became an importance motif of the Aesthetic movement (The aesthetic movement,4 March 2023, www.theartstory.org).

Critics, many of whom are female, devote much attention to housewives, who now have the duty of decorating their homes artistically (Harwood,2012, p.515). Writers emphasize that decorating is a very important task because the design and furnishings must demonstrate the family's culture and taste and create a wholesome environment and refuge to counter the negative effects of contemporary life. This new role, coupled with greater emphasis upon education, prompts many women to become artists, designers, decorators, and critics. Not only do they create artistic goods and interiors, but they also write books and articles to assist other women in doing the same (Harwood,2012, p.515). They form and participate in art groups, such as China painters or embroidery societies, as leisure activities or to produce an income. Some of these groups exert important and long-lasting effects on art education by establishing art schools or museums (Harwood,2012, p.515).

The Japanese Influence

When in 1854 Japan began openly trading with foreign powers, their products flooded the British market (The aesthetic movement,4 March 2023, www.theartstory.org). Artists and consumers alike were captivated by the stylized organic motifs, circular designs, and geometric patterns that characterized this new aesthetic. Its simplicity and elegance of form contrasted sharply with overcrowded and busy Victorian designs (The aesthetic movement,4 March 2023, www.theartstory.org).

Although public perception of Wilde's involvement with the Aesthetic movement meant that it, too, suffered, the modern notion of "art for art's sake" affirmed the movement's place in art history (The aesthetic movement, 4 March 2023, www.theartstory.org). The idea that art had its own intrinsic value released it from the obligation of having a moral or historical meaning (The aesthetic movement, 4 March 2023, www.theartstory.org). This rejection of the past (of historical or mythological narratives) became vital for modern painters. The artist, it was thought, should have freedom of expression - in terms of subject choice and stylistic representation (The aesthetic movement, 4 March 2023, www.theartstory.org). This concept of self-expression combined with an eagerness to explore the formal aspects of painting (color, form, and composition), culminated in the Abstract Expressionist movement of the mid-20th century and continues to be a basis of creative exploration for many contemporary artists in the 21st century (The aesthetic movement, 4 March 2023, www.theartstory.org).

Art and Crafts

In Britain the damaging effects of machine-dominated production on both social conditions and the quality of manufactured goods had been recognized since around 1840 (Art and Crafts, 2023, www.vam.ac.uk). But it was not until the 1860s and '70s that new approaches in architecture and design were championed in an attempt to correct the problem (Art and Crafts, 2023, www.vam.ac.uk). The Arts and Crafts movement in Britain was born out of an increasing understanding that society needed to adopt a different set of priorities in relation to the manufacture of objects (Art and Crafts, 2023, www.vam.ac.uk).

The Arts and Crafts Movement builds on the principles and theories of Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, a Gothic Revival architect; John Ruskin, an art historian, and critic; and, more important, on the theories and practice of William Morris. Pugin is the first to apply a moral

dimension to art and calls for designs that develop from function and appropriate context, structural honesty, and an honest use of materials (Harwood,2012, p.531). John Ruskin admires Gothic, functionality, and honesty, but he also reveres the Middle Ages. He equates good design with joy in labor, which lays the foundation for reforming the work process (Harwood,2012,p.531). Ruskin believes that industrialization has dehumanized the laborer, resulting in badly designed and poor quality manufactured goods; and purchasing these goods debases the society itself (Harwood,2012, p.531).

William Morris was its founder and leader. He abhorred the cheap and cheerful products of manufacturing, the terrible working and living conditions of the poor, and the lack of guiding moral principles of the times (Lorraine Fraser,2023, [www. ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub](http://www.ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub)). Morris “called for a fitness of purpose, truth to the nature of the materials and methods of production, and individual expression by both artist and worker” (Meggs & Purvis, 2011, p. 160) These philosophical points are still pivotal to the expression of design style and practice to this day(Lorraine Fraser,2023, [www. ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub](http://www.ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub)). Design styles from the Arts & Crafts movement and on have emphasized, in varying degrees, either fitness of purpose and material integrity, or individual expression and the need for visual subjectivity (Lorraine Fraser,2023, [www. ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub](http://www.ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub)). Morris based his philosophy on the writings of John Ruskin, a critic of the Industrial Age, and a man who felt that society should work toward promoting the happiness and well-being of every one of its members, by creating a union of art and labour in the service of society (Lorraine Fraser,2023, [www. ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub](http://www.ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub)). Ruskin admired the medieval Gothic style for these qualities, as well as the Italian aesthetic of medieval art because of its direct and uncomplicated depiction of nature (Lorraine Fraser,2023, [www. ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub](http://www.ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub)).

A Socialist, he advocates well-designed goods for everyone but largely rejects the means for achieving this goal, the machine (Art and Crafts, 2023, www.vam.ac.uk). In a further paradox, the goods produced by him and his firm are only affordable by the affluent. Harwood, Buie; May, Bridget; Sherman, Curt. *Architecture and Interior Design (Fashion Series)* (p. 530). Pearson Education. Kindle Edition. He wanted to free the working classes from the frustration of a working day focused solely on repetitive tasks and allow them the pleasure of craft-based production in which they would engage directly with the creative process from beginning to end (Art and Crafts, 2023, www.vam.ac.uk).

Between 1895 and 1905 this strong sense of social purpose drove the creation of over a hundred organizations and guilds that centered on Arts and Crafts principles in Britain (Art and Crafts, 2023, www.vam.ac.uk).

Progressive new art schools and technical colleges in London, Glasgow, and Birmingham encouraged the development of both workshops and individual makers, as well as the revival of techniques, including enameling, embroidery, and calligraphy (Art and Crafts, 2023, www.vam.ac.uk). Arts and Crafts designers also forged new relationships with manufacturers that enabled them to sell their goods through shops in London such as Morris & Co. (William Morris's 'all under one roof' store on Oxford Street), Heal's, and Liberty. This commercial distribution helped the Movement's ideas reach a much wider audience (Art and Crafts, 2023, www.vam.ac.uk).

Although it was known by a single name (one that wasn't in fact used widely until the early 20th century), the Arts and Crafts movement was in fact comprised of a number of different artistic societies, such as the Exhibition Society, the Arts Workers Guild (set up in 1884), and other craftspeople in both small workshops and large manufacturing companies (Art and Crafts, 2023, www.vam.ac.uk).

Although the Arts and Crafts movement evolved in the city, at its heart was nostalgia for rural traditions and 'the simple life', which meant that living and working in the countryside was the ideal to which many of its artists aspired. Increasingly, many left the city to establish new ways of living and working, with workshops set up across Britain in locations including the Cotswolds, the Lake District, Sussex and Cornwall (Art and Crafts,2023, www.vam.ac.uk).

Arts and Crafts makers based in rural communities both revived craft traditions and created employment for local people (Art and Crafts,2023, www.vam.ac.uk). This kind of development meant that the Movement endured longer in the countryside than in the city, and had a more significant impact on the rural than the urban economy (Art and Crafts,2023, www.vam.ac.uk). Significantly, the Arts and Crafts community was open to the efforts of non-professionals, encouraging the involvement of amateurs and students through organizations such as the Home Arts and Industries Association (Art and Crafts,2023, www.vam.ac.uk). And it also created an environment in which, for the first time, women as well as men could begin to take an active role in developing new forms of design, both as makers and consumers (Art and Crafts,2023, www.vam.ac.uk).

Despite regarding itself as rural, the movement largely takes place in urban settings (Harwood,2012,p.531).

Morris dies in 1896, and the guilds prove to be commercially unsuccessful (Harwood,2012, p.531). As society loses interest in the Arts and Crafts Movement, the marketplace for handcrafts disappears. Great Britain exports fewer goods, and the prosperity of the middle and upper classes declines (Harwood,2012, p.531). Ideals begin to change and a return to classicism and formality replaces medieval informality. The death blow to the movement comes following World War I when Modernism gains favor in Britain (Harwood,2012, p.531).

Conclusion

The Aesthetic Movement was fundamentally distinct from the Arts and Crafts Movement (Willette,2018, www.arthistoryunstuffed.com).

The Aesthetic Movement advances the idea that good taste is not ostentatious display, but careful planning based on educated knowledge of artistic principles and historic precedents (Harwood,2012,p.515). Developing from various artistic theories, the movement does not distinguish between the fine and decorative arts but emphasizes beauty and usefulness for all forms of expression, particularly the home. Preferring no style above any other and avoiding historicism, the Aesthetic Movement internationalizes design by drawing upon scores of styles and cultures, most of which are preindustrial, a signal of its rejection of contemporary values (Harwood,2012,p.515).

In terms of longevity, like most of the art movements of the early twentieth century, Art Nouveau was brief, ended with finality by the Great War. But its main ideas lived on (Willette,2018, www.arthistoryunstuffed.com). The concept of reform, inspired by the horrors of manufactured decoration, continued after the War and were manifested by the work of the Bauhaus architects and by the Swiss architect, Le Corbusier (Willette,2018, www.arthistoryunstuffed.com). The concept of the total work was also continued by these very same architects, resulting in a complete redesign of exteriors and interiors, and home furnishings during the 1920s (Willette,2018, www.arthistoryunstuffed.com). At the Bauhaus Walter Gropius reinstated the medieval ideals of William Morris and the hand made ethos of the Arts and Crafts movement until he abandoned the idea of unity of arts and crafts for the unity of arts and industry in 1923 (Willette,2018,www.arthistoryunstuffed.com).

Inspired by the reformist passion of figures such as William Morris and John Ruskin, the Arts and Crafts movement had a huge effect on Victorian society (Art and Crafts,2023, www.vam.ac.uk). Its advocates looked to history and to the countryside to counteract the damaging effects of industrial production, developing a quietly revolutionary new take on domestic design (Art and Crafts,2023, www.vam.ac.uk)

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