

---

**The Journal of  
Modern Craft**

Volume 2—Issue 3

November 2009

pp. 247–250

DOI:

10.2752/174967809X12556950208826

Reprints available directly  
from the publishers

Photocopying permitted by  
licence only

© Berg 2009

---

# Editorial Introduction

---

Almost two years ago now, the *Journal of Modern Craft's* first editorial argued for a broad framing of our subject, one that would go beyond the studio crafts and their discrete disciplines, as well as the tendency to place craft in a series of continuous dialectics with modernity, industrialization, commerce, and fine art aesthetics. Our first Primary Text, by the late Reyner Banham, argued for an authentic species of craft embedded (and buried, out of view) within the routines of the factory. In more recent issues we have continued to seek out scholarship on craft well outside “movement” logic, in contexts such as tourist economies, public art performance, and industrial design.

Yet the area of academic study most closely associated with the word “craft” remains, of course, the Arts and Crafts movement. In that first editorial we expressed the hope that a major study would emerge that tackled the movement's complexity and paradoxical nature. Gillian Naylor's *The Arts and Crafts Movement: A Study of Its Sources, Ideals and Influence on Design Theory*, first published in 1971, set the bar high. It is salutary to consider that although there has been much valuable infilling in the form of newly discovered objects, good international surveys, monographs on individual figures, and detailed regional studies—both in our own pages, and in such exemplary recent publications as Lawrence Kreisman and Glenn Mason's *The Arts and Crafts Movement in the Pacific Northwest*—there has been nothing quite as energetic, incisive and politically aware as Naylor's pioneering contribution, written nearly forty years ago.

The last fresh contextualization of the Arts and Crafts movement was the decisive turn to Romantic Nationalism, a diffusionist approach that informed Elizabeth Cumming and Wendy Kaplan's succinct, admirable 1991 *The Arts and Crafts Movement in the World of Art* series and the papers in *Art and the National Dream* (1993) edited by Nicola Gordon Bowe. A key moment for reframing Arts and Crafts studies should have been 2005—when two major exhibitions were mounted (at the Victoria and Albert Museum and at Los Angeles County Museum). Both, however, were chiefly informed by Romantic Nationalist scholarship, choosing to explore the international nature of the movement by tracking its dissemination country by country. When nationalist agendas are examined in relative isolation, we miss the

opportunities to see what is common to different experiences of craft reform, what hybrids develop, and why. Craft movements do not chart a simple, linear process of influence, but rather a series of asymmetrical and overlapping fits and starts.

Then there is the question of the relationship between the Arts and Crafts movement and later developments within modern craft and design. Alan Crawford's remarkable, modestly entitled "The Arts and Crafts Movement: A Sketch"—in Alan Crawford (ed.), *By Hammer and By Hand: The Arts and Crafts Movement in Birmingham*, 1984—showed the way. As Tom Crook argued in our first issue of this year, the Arts and Crafts movement should be viewed as presenting an alternative option within (rather than an escape from) modernity, and its political and aesthetic transformations. A logical corollary is that historians should look beyond the chronological boundaries of the Arts and Crafts movement, finding continuities that might reshape our understanding of early modernism in design and architecture, and uncovering hidden stories of craft hitherto obscured by an interwar rhetoric of progressive technology.

And there are plenty of other possibilities for further research. These might include the investigation of workshop practice and engagement with materials—themes intrinsic to the Arts and Crafts movement's pedagogy, both informal and formal, and transmitted through permissible tools, and the study of historic and vernacular material. This could tie in with an investigation of time consumption and normative work practices during the high period of the Arts and Crafts movement. John Roberts's Marxist-inflected art historical study, *The Intangibilities of Form:*

*Skill and Deskillling in Art After the Readymade*, suggests the potential for using a labor theory of culture as a model to investigate Arts and Crafts values. Equally, a history of colonial art education would show Arts and Crafts values being deployed and depleted in strategies of underdevelopment.

The research articles included in this issue suggest the rich possibilities afforded by some of these approaches. Each essay presents craft reform as inextricably bound to modern innovations, whether those occur in the registers of mass production, urban reinvention, or spiritual experimentation.

Freyja Hartzell offers a sharply observed account of the stonewares produced in the Westerwald of Germany at the turn of the century. She shows how designers such as Richard Riemerschmid appropriated the *völkisch* emblems of vernacular ceramic production in the service of a modern German material culture. Jordi Falgàs tracks the transmission of these German ideas to the town of Girona in Spain, where the progressive architect Rafael Masó tried to put similar principles into practice. If Riemerschmid and his colleagues enjoyed success in reframing craft within an ideologically driven reform movement, Masó's story is fascinating partly because of his failures. In the politically fractured context of Catalonia, artisanal architecture was impossible not because it was mute, but because it spoke all too clearly. Our third article brings us forward in time to the seam between the Arts and Crafts era and the emergence of an individualist studio craft movement. Art historian Roberta Meyer and master woodworker Mark Sfirri place the iconic figure of Wharton Esherick—often described as the first American studio

furniture maker—into the surprising context of 1920s international anthroposophy. Meyer and Sfirri show that the motifs and intent of Esherick's furniture conform closely to the teachings of this modernist spiritualist movement, pioneered by the Austro-Hungarian philosopher Rudolf Steiner.

All three articles attest to the importance of in-depth primary research in the effort to come to grips with the historical craft movement. In this spirit, we offer a Primary Text that takes us further forward in time to the postwar period, but not necessarily away from turn-of-the-century preoccupations. Paul Caffrey introduces us to a fascinating document of 1960s design reform, the so-called "Scandinavian Report," in which a team of visiting designers frankly appraise the strengths and weaknesses of Irish craft and industrial production. It is fascinating to observe some of the same issues that were at issue in Germany and Spain, c.1900—such as the proper deployment of folk motifs and

the ideal organization of workshops—still at issue in this very different chronological and geographical situation.

Finally, we have a Statement of Practice by the founders of the Handspring Puppet Company, who are based in South Africa but have taken London by storm recently in the theatrical production *War Horse*. They argue that the contemporary puppet is a unique form of craft because its "ur-narrative" is a functional commitment to "seeming to be alive." There are many subtle ways in which this absorbing account of puppet design connects with Arts and Crafts studies—by allying craftedness with radical modernity, through its global references and inspirations, through puppetry's implicit commentary on individual agency and, not least, in a shared ambition to create a constructed object with a narrative, animate purpose.

The Editors

*The Journal of Modern Craft*