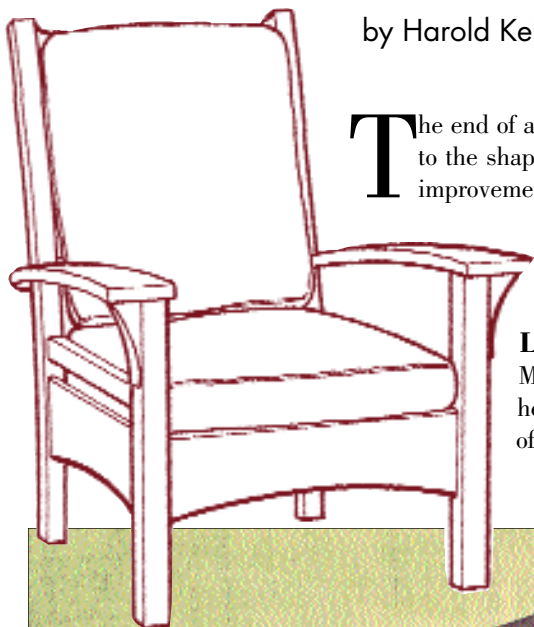


TWENTIETH CENTURY DESIGN: FROM COTSWALD TO TODAY

by Harold Kellar



The end of a century is often spurs a re-assessment of everything from the shape of a tea cup to the shape of society. There is a tendency to look back to better times, to look forward to improvements the future will bring, while all the time recoiling from the current mess.

That's exactly what happened at the end of the Nineteenth Century, when some of the most influential people in England and America seemed to be looking forward not to the Twentieth Century, but to a return of the Fourteenth.

LOOKING FOR A NEW DIRECTION

Many people who enjoy the Modern Movement criticize the English Art & Crafts as heavy, clumsy, and dark. Yet as the Nineteenth Century wound to a close, a group of forward-looking designers emerged. In the hands of these designer-craftsmen,

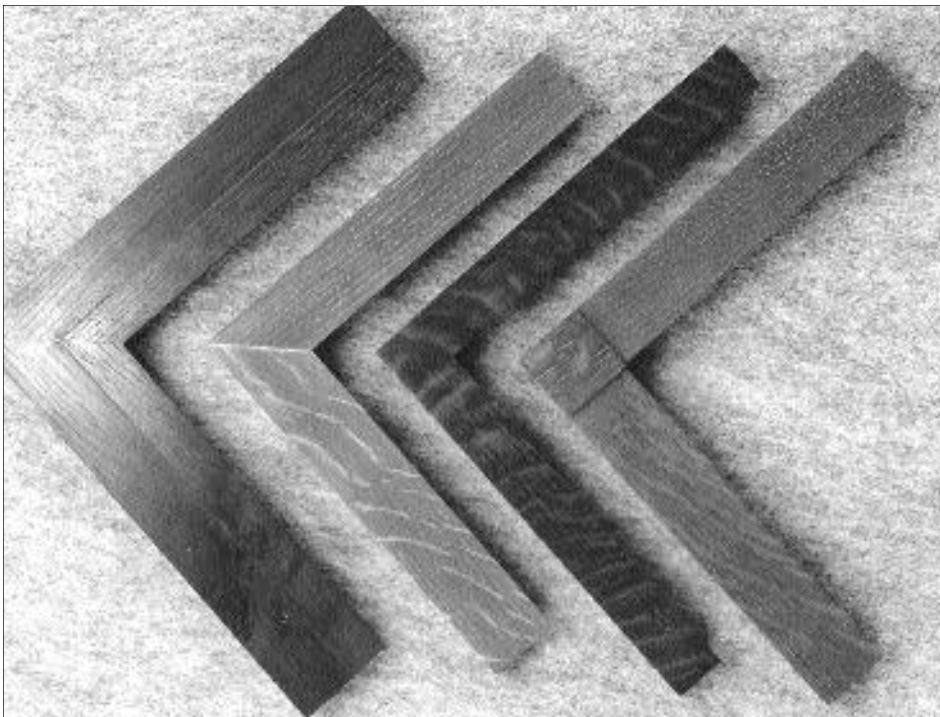


Arts & Crafts designs are still being produced today. Here some frame mouldings from the Holton Furniture And Frame are shown. Above, the typical "Morris" chair.

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“old fashioned” furniture and decorative arts were transformed by simplifications, stylization, and streamlining. They represent a progressive movement that set the stage for the best of Twentieth Century design.

High-backed and severe with a chunky little brace that keeps it from falling backwards, the early Arts & Crafts oak



Simple lines and fine furniture finishes are hallmarks of the Arts & Crafts look. These elements are faithfully recreated by fine frame makers and reproduction companies today. (The samples above are courtesy of Keller & Klein FrameMakers).

chair looks more like a shop project gone awry than a harbinger of sleek and streamlined modern design. (Indeed, the early work of the English Arts & Crafts Movement was often described as “savagely simple”.) One of these chairs was recently on display at a gallery here in Philadelphia; it is a thought in progress, a design searching for a direction.

Turn of the century English craftsmen were among the first to turn away from the excess of Victorian decoration in search of a new language of design that would come to be known as modernism. That early chair is a reflection of the tensions between the new industrial world and the agrarian past; between the possibilities of machine mass production and limited, but higher quality, output of handwork; and between the tug of tradition and the lure of innovation that existed in England during the second half of the Nineteenth Century. These turn of the century craftsmen, by honoring an agrarian past and looking forward to an industrial future, redefined design.

THE BASIS OF THE MOVEMENT

The roots of modern design reach back to the Crystal Palace exhibition of 1851. Essentially a home show, it was English society’s first exposure to the vast array of consumer goods made possible by mass production. In a few more years, Western trade with Japan would inflame English sensibilities. At the same time, in response to the Industrial Revolution and what he considered to be the enslavement of workers, philosopher John Ruskin advocated a return to hand-craftsmanship, straightforward design, and natural materials.

William Morris adopted and adapted Ruskin’s philosophy and became the major figure in the Arts & Crafts Movement. He believed that art and architecture reflected the moral conditions of society: a good society would produce good art. For many of the Movement’s proponents, the “good society” was medieval England.

They felt that the society of the Middle Ages dignified man’s work and gave it meaning. The Middle Ages provided the craftsman the freedom to be happy in his work. Beauty was as important as food and shelter. The Industrial Revolution, on the other hand, produced modern mass production that degraded both the maker and

the product.

The American Arts & Crafts Movement was not burdened with utopian ideals. They were looking for a design movement that was truly American, not merely copied from the Europeans (as was often the case). Americans were ready for simple, straightforward Mission, or Craftsman, furniture that summoned up the image of the noble American craftsman.

THE EFFECTS OF THE MOVEMENT

The debt that the designers of today owe to the Arts & Crafts Movement is just now being recognized. The radical thinking that produced the Arts & Crafts Movement has continued to provoke and inspire artists and craftsmen throughout the world. In effect, the movement spans the time frame from William Morris to Frank Lloyd Wright.

In America the movement landed on the East Coast, in Chicago, and in California. It traveled to Scotland and most of Europe. The Japanese influence merged with it on the West Coast

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and the Midwest. Today it is alive throughout Italy, America, and most of Europe.

The movement encompassed architecture, furniture, pottery, bookbinding, and most of the life of the artists and craftsmen that were infused with the Mission. A total rejection of the Industrial Revolution and all of its dehumanizing aspects as well as the generally poor goods that it produced (think of Charlie Chaplain and *The Good Life* and *Modern Times*) lead to the return to small production facilities where the craftsmen were responsible for the total product and its quality.

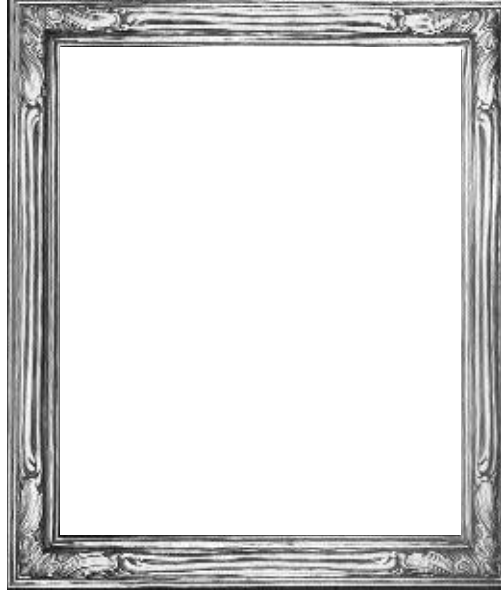
The Movement called for a return to pre-Renaissance society. In this sense, it was both an anachronism and an avant-garde.

CRAFTSMANSHIP IN COTSWALD

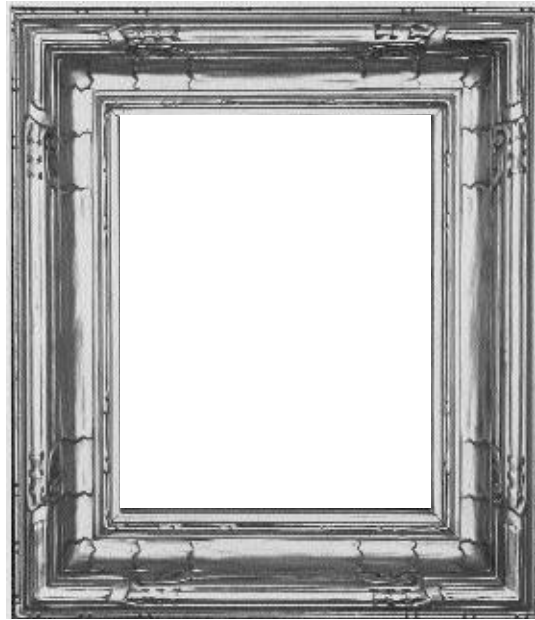
In the Spring of '94, three talented young architects left behind promising careers in a large city to pursue a simple life in a small village. They intended to forsake modern pressures and the conveniences of modern life and return to an almost Medieval lifestyle. They intended to become designer-craftsmen, building and designing houses, their complete furnishings, and landscaping. They intended to do their work entirely by hand without the benefit of machinery of any kind. They wanted to raise their families to live and work in their same surroundings, using their homes as showcases for their crafts.

This scenario sounds as though it could come from 1994, yet our modern-day corporate dropouts are merely descendants from the Arts & Crafts Movement and Nineteenth Century England. The year was actually 1894, and the three young men were Ernest Grimsley and the Barnsley brothers, Sidney and Ernest. They moved to a section of rural England known as the Cotswolds.

Contemporary craftsmanship was born in the Cotswolds; in fact, it would not exist today without the aesthetic influence of the movement that rejected the Industrial Revolution. The movement was a complex assortment of artistic, moral, and utopian philosophies. In this small village, these architects found a tradition of crafts-



These antique frames are also part of the American Arts & Crafts movement, although their design is not so "savagely simple."



This frame and the above are shown courtesy of Eli Wilner Period Frames and Mirrors, NYC.

manship that had been protected from the tortures of mass production. They hoped to revive those crafts for others and restore to them the dignity and purpose of building by hand.

The traditions they saved and the aesthetics they set are still with us today, but the social experiment, based on cooperative manual labor and a dislike for machines, failed. Yet they were able to practice what others only theorized about. They lived in beautiful cottages with charming workshops in barns located on the grounds surrounding the houses. They used their homes to display their wares. They literally lived and breathed this utopian philosophy: that furniture should be "solid and well made in workmanship, and in design have nothing about it that is not easily defensible, no monstrosities or extravagances, not even of beauty lest we weary of it...well made and well proportioned, but simple to the last degree."

The early furniture that came out of this design philosophy was heavy and severe; probably too severe for most people. Gimsley and the Barnsleys reduced furniture to its functional parts and let the natural beauty of the construction and the wood stand alone. They shared an attitude toward craftsmanship that had a solid impact on their designs.

They adapted methods of design and construction from a variety of sources, including architectural woodwork, historic furniture, and even from an appreciation of rural crafts, such as traditional farm wagons. The

Movement preached a simplicity of design and of "furniture made from timber, not walking sticks". This simplicity resulted in a sameness of design that characterized most of work of American Arts & Crafts furniture, while the Cotswald group

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seems to have avoided this trap.

In the Movement in England, the same worker would produce both heavy, primitive pieces (some critics called these “the work of savages”) as well as pieces with glossy finishes combined with complex veneer. For these craftsmen, furniture fell into two categories, each requiring different approaches to design and construction. The first category was everyday furniture: chairs, tables, and other necessary furniture that would be simple, even rough, and unfinished. The second group consisted of “state” furniture: cabinets and other decorative pieces that were used sparingly throughout the house. These pieces were as elegant and as elaborate as possible.

As the work of these Cotswald craftsmen progressed, it became lighter and more refined, more elaborate, and more finely finished. It still, however, incorporated the same design details as the earliest work. Their work was sought after by those who wanted — and were able to pay for — meticulous handwork and original design.

The designs worked; the shop were busy; and the furniture was well-received. The demand for the work kept the workshops busy for over 30 years. Yet this was only possible because Gimsley and the Barnsley’s had private incomes. Their successors could only carry on by accepting machinery into their workshops — the Arts & Crafts Movement had not won that battle. Peter Waals continued the tradition of Cotswald and his shops were busy until his death in 1937.

World War I signaled the death of the Arts & Crafts Movement. William Morris may have misjudged the power of the Industrial Revolution, and his call for a medieval lifestyle may have been fanciful, but his philosophy based on the unity of art, work, and life was compelling. It still inspires designers and craftsmen. The most abiding gift of the Arts & Crafts Movement is its consistent body of design and its doctrine: “Simple, functional forms, the restrained use of subtle decoration, and a delight in and respect for natural materials.”

IT’S LEGACY TODAY

We should look at the Arts & Crafts Movement as the first step in a continuing design evolution. Throughout the ages, designers have more than copied the works of others; they have forging with inspiration for designs and craftsmanship that are not afraid to show their heritage as they improve upon it. They create designs that are timeless.

Today we are approaching the end of a century, just as the Art & Crafts proponents were. Today we are re-assessing our lives and our society, while looking back on one hundred years of designs that have made us what we are today. □

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