

Homegrown

THE PARADOXES OF INTERNATIONAL ARTS AND CRAFTS

by Gail Leggio

What do we mean when we use the word *international* in discussing art? In 1932 Philip Johnson and Henry Russell Hitchcock coined the term “International Style” to describe a modernist architecture characterized by cubic shapes, an absence of moldings and other details, and large windows, often in horizontal bands. They cited as progenitors the rigorous Viennese theorist Adolf Loos (1870–1933), who in 1908 wrote an article entitled “Ornament and Crime,” and Walter Gropius (1883–1969), the leader of the Bauhaus. International Style became de rigueur for big-city office buildings for decades and spread, in debased form, beyond urban centers. There were successes, such as Mies van der Rohe’s elegant Seagram Building (1956–1959) in New York City, but too often simplicity calcified into banality, and cities around the world took on a facile and dis-spiriting homogeneity. A different sort of world movement is examined in the exhibition “International Arts and Crafts,” which originated at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and traveled to the Indianapolis Museum of Art before ending its tour at the de Young branch of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (March 18–June 18, 2006).

Arts and Crafts began in England—under the tutelage of two visionaries, John Ruskin (1819–1900) and William Morris (1834–96), both medievalists who developed principles that went beyond historicism—and evolved into a phenomenon that swept America and Europe, penetrating as

Elena Polenova, wall cupboard,
painted birch, Russian,
c. 1885–90, made at the
furniture workshop at the
Abramtsevo artists’ colony



far as Russia, Scandinavia and Japan. The Anglo-American part of the story has been told before, but curators Karen Livingstone and Linda Parry have cast an unusually wide net in selecting their 300 objects and assembling essays for the handsome catalogue, emphasizing geographic range and stylistic diversity.¹ Morris's revolutionary insight was to realize that everyone lives with design and the quality of the everyday objects we surround ourselves with affects the quality of our lives. He shifted attention from public spaces to the domestic environment as a locus for creativity and challenged hierarchical assumptions that separated the artist from the craftsman. The Arts and Crafts movement established the importance of well-thought-out design both in luxury goods—in the High Victorian era often swamped with egregious ornament—and in objects for the masses. The exquisite interior design ensembles we see in museums were enjoyed by the rich, for the most part, and this was a problem the Socialist Morris could not solve. But good design, whether handmade or mass-produced, became a cause that cut across class distinctions and spread around the world.

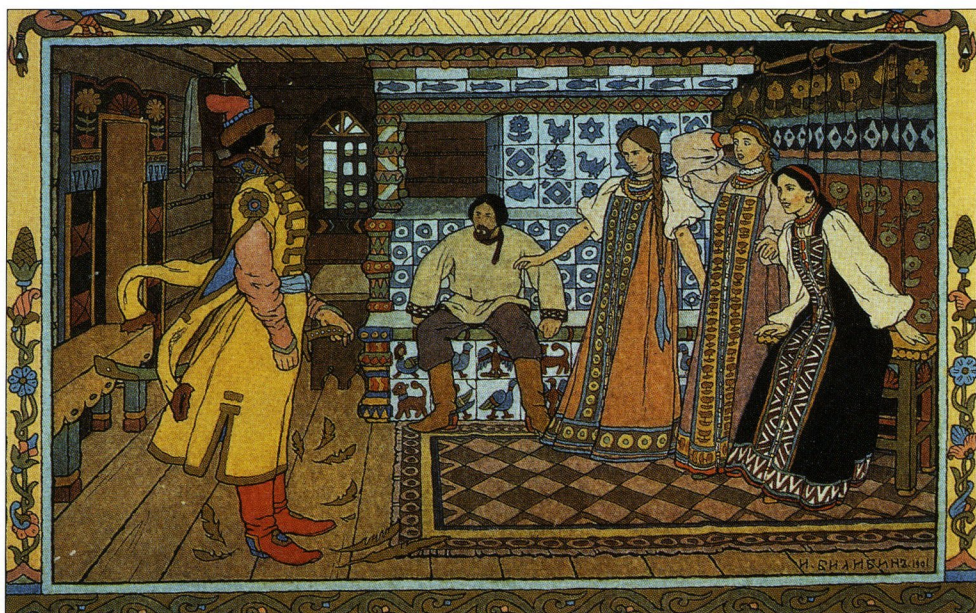
Why did Arts and Crafts spread so far, so fast? One reason is that the movement offered that rarest of intellectual commodities, an elastic and adaptable ideology. It began in disgust at the dehumanizing effects of factory production, rescued handicraft traditions and revered the past, but its principles could be applied to industrial design and the needs of an emerging modernism. The virtues of honest construction, fidelity to materials and beauty in the domestic milieu had widespread appeal. The Arts and Crafts idea found very particular avatars as it combined with nationalistic impulses and diverse indigenous traditions; it was also distilled into modernist fundamentals. Morris plays a seminal role in Nikolaus Pevsner's classic *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936). Another reason for the rapid dissemination of Arts and Crafts is logistical. This is the era of the international exposition, which provided a forum for sharing ideas, as well as an arena for displays of national pride and technical and artistic prowess. Morris's dissatisfaction with the kind of goods on display at the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851 (formally, the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations) was a catalyst for the design reform movement, and the expositions that proliferated over the next half century were a principal instrument of reform. The Arts and Crafts movement took its name from the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, founded in 1887 to promote the work of individual craftsmen and reform in manufacturing. Other organizations founded in the 1880s helped continue Morris's work on social, aesthetic and commercial fronts. Among these were the Art Workers Guild (1884) and the Century Guild, founded by A.H. Mackmurdo in 1882, which published *The Hobby Horse*, a model for the periodical as a complete work of art, with layout, type and margins as carefully considered as the illustrations. Walter Crane (1845–1915), as president of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, proposed a Victoria and Albert exhibition in 1910 but was turned down. The tide of

modernism was rising, and revolutionaries rarely acknowledge the influence of their immediate predecessors. The Victoria and Albert mounted its first Arts and Crafts show in 1950. Now, a half century later, the reputation of the movement has grown and, in a multicultural world, its global reach is being examined with fresh eyes.

The British section of the catalogue is organized by themes and genres, with no attempt to be thorough. The reader can select a thread and follow it through the international labyrinth, an often rewarding exercise. For example, the German designer Peter Behrens's dictum "everything that belongs to life should receive beauty"² is a clear echo of Morris's "Beauty...is...no mere accident...but a positive necessity of life...."³ Perhaps the most unexpected genre examined is photography. Despite the new artform's mechanical quality, Arts and Crafts advocates were, in many cases, quick to grasp its practical applications—disseminating design by documenting buildings and reproducing artworks—and its expressive possibilities. You can see both aspects in the work of Frederick Henry Evans (1853–1943). In his platinum print *In the Attics* (1896) Evans lights the yearning, pyramidal hand-hewn elm rafters with an almost-religious radiance. The photograph was taken at William Morris's sixteenth-century Oxfordshire house, Kelmscott Manor. Evans, a Swedenborgian like the American painter George Inness, was especially sensitive to church architecture, as in his organic *The Sea of Steps* (1903), a view of the stairs of the Chapter House at Wells Cathedral. The oceanic swell of the weathered steps—achieved by placing the camera on the steps themselves rather than on a tripod—reminds us how intrinsic the texture and profusion of nature are to Arts and Crafts. The object in question can be a simple wooden chest, a densely foliated fabric by Morris or a silver and green glass carafe (c. 1904–05) with elegantly weedy tendrils by C.R. Ashbee (1863–1942).

The wellspring of Arts and Crafts was medieval rather than classical, the movement's utopian dreams leavened with a zest for the local and the irregular. As this far-ranging exhibition demonstrates, it was a phenomenon built on paradoxes: simultaneously rural and urban, democratic and luxurious, antiquarian and modernist. Any survey of this movement—which includes Germany, the Netherlands, Central Europe, Vienna, Russia, Finland, Sweden and Norway—is bound to be selective. The case of Japan is unusual and covered here by three essays, on the Mingei movement, artist-craftsmen and the culture of collecting. While Japanese art was a major influence on avant-garde art in Europe and the United States in the later nineteenth century, this exhibition and catalogue focus on the decades leading up to World War II, when the Japanese were looking to Morris and other Arts and Crafts Western theorists for ways of conceptualizing their own traditions. The cross-currents can be dizzying.

One of the two reconstructed furnished interiors in the Victoria and Albert's traveling exhibition is Japanese, emphasizing the furthest reach of Arts



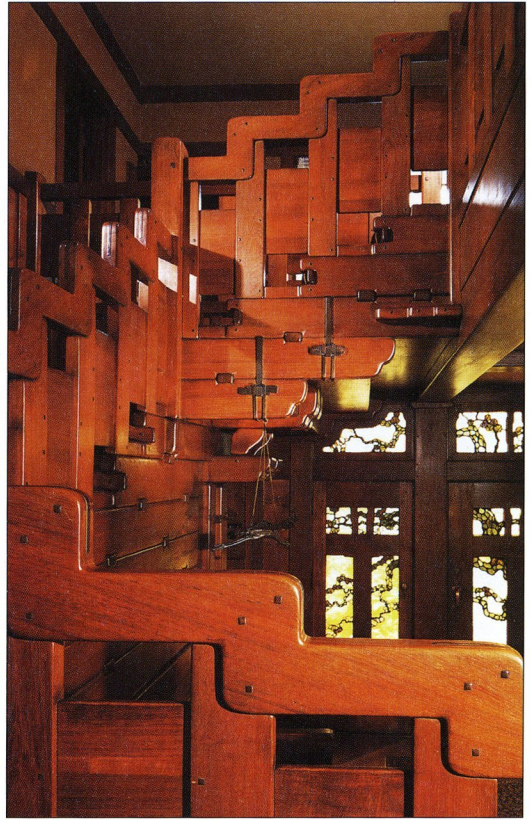
Ivan Bilbin, illustration for *Maria Morevna*, first published 1900–01 VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON

and Crafts; the other is more mainstream, an American Craftsman room inspired by Gustav Stickley (1858–1942). Stickley, an entrepreneur and nurturer of design talent, exemplifies the movement in the United States. The first two issues of his journal, *The Craftsman* (first issued in 1901), were tributes to William Morris and John Ruskin. The Craftsman Workshops in Syracuse, New York—like Elbert Hubbard’s Roycroft in Aurora and Ralph Whitehead’s Byrdcliffe in Woodstock—were based on British models such as Ashbee’s Guild of Handicraft, founded in London’s East End in 1888 and moved to Chipping Campden in the Cotswolds. Stickley advocated “the structural style of cabinet making” and argued that “such details as mortise and tenon, key and dovetail can be made very decorative, provided they appear only where needed and actually do the work for which they are intended.”⁷⁴ You can see this principle at work in a handsome oak and copper cellarette (pre-1906) made by the Roycroft Furniture Shop, especially in the exaggerated functional joining elements and the hinges emphasized as the major ornament of the façade. The dominant aesthetic aspects of the piece, however, are its solid rectilinearity and overall warm, earthy palette. Hand-hammered copper and iron were preferred metals, and the characteristic wood is quarter-sawn oak. Stickley often exposed his wood to ammonia fumes to soften the color.

Americans took to Arts and Crafts with fervor for a number of reasons. The formal simplicity and non-hierarchical spirit of the style appealed to a country founded on democratic, egalitarian tenets. At the same time, in the

Charles Sumner Greene and
Henry Mather Greene, detail of stairs,
David B. Gamble House, Pasadena,
California, 1907–09

midst of post-Civil War prosperity, an increasingly sophisticated public was ready to consider domestic decoration a legitimate sphere of activity. And, as David Cather's remarks in his catalogue essay, "because there was no stigma in the United States attached to being 'in trade,' Americans could be...straightforward about melding Arts and Crafts with commerce."⁵ The Arts and Crafts preference for the vernacular appealed to a kind of enlightened nationalism, enriched with aspects of regionalism and



what we now call multiculturalism. Native American motifs appear in Rookwood Pottery ceramics, as well as a 1910 leaded-glass and bronze lamp and an 1893 "Pueblo" silver, enamel and ruby vase (designed by Paulding Farnham) from Tiffany. Louis Comfort Tiffany himself collected Native American artifacts, such as a Yakima beaded dress (1868–1900), and Stickley included Native American basketry in his 1903 Arts and Crafts exhibition in Syracuse and Rochester.

The United States is a big country, and Arts and Crafts developed distinct regional idioms here. It is important to remember that—while exhibitions such as this one necessarily focus on portable objects—architecture and landscape were crucial to the movement from the start. The need to furnish Red House (1859), designed in Bexleyheath, Kent, by Philip Webb for William Morris, was the impetus for the founding in 1861 of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., later Morris & Co. Topography, raw materials and local traditions played roles in the development of the East Coast style of Stickley and others, the Prairie School of Frank Lloyd Wright and the California work of Charles and Henry Greene. A reviewer for the London venue of the exhibition was understandably enamored of the gleaming wood interiors of Greene and Greene, in masterpieces such as the Gamble House in Pasadena (1907–09): "a testament

to timber, open spaces and serious money.”⁶ When Ashbee visited Greene and Greene, he praised their exquisite detailing and “supreme feeling for the material....”⁷

The most striking omission in the Victoria and Albert survey is Belgium, on the grounds that the country was a hotbed of Art Nouveau, a sensuous style distinct from Arts and Crafts, whose British proponents were “more puritanical in their aims and proselytizing in their manner,”⁸ according to curator Karen Livingstone. Some British artists, such as Walter Crane, were indeed wary of Art Nouveau, although it may be going too far to characterize the styles as antithetical. In fact, many British artists, such as Charles Rennie Mackintosh, M.H. Baillie Scott and Ashbee, worked alongside their Continental counterparts. One problem with excluding Belgium is that it sidelines Henry van de Velde (1863–1957), who appears in the article on Germany as an important design influence and founder of the Weimar Arts and Craft School (1906–14), the forerunner of the Bauhaus. But van de Velde’s admiration for Morris is not emphasized: how he founded a cultural circle in Antwerp called *Als ik Kan* (Van Eyck’s motto, which Morris had also adopted as his own), how he followed Morris in dedicating himself to book design and the decorative arts. Van de Velde’s furniture was on sale at Siegfried Bing’s elegant Paris shop, L’Art Nouveau, but he also worked in a solid, pared-down idiom that was instrumental in facilitating the transition from cottage vernacular to the honest construction of good modernism.

The connections between the British and the Belgians are numerous and significant.⁹ Artists such as Edward Burne-Jones forged ties with the Belgian symbolists. Further complicating the style question is the Aesthetic Movement, whose champions, such as James McNeill Whistler, were fully committed to design reform. Emphasizing the down-to-earth quality of Arts and Crafts, Walter Crane did refer to Art Nouveau as “that strange decorative disease,”¹⁰ preferring—with some of the contrarian eccentricity of the British—to give credit to the indigenous genius William Blake. Yet the bold curves of Crane’s book illustrations, especially the toy-books, were widely recognized as a crucial component of an international, multifaceted movement. John Russell Taylor, in his insightful study *The Art Nouveau Book in Britain*, makes a good case for overlap, seeing Art Nouveau as building on the Arts and Crafts passion for every aspect of the page design—type and margins, as well as pictures—and refining it for a “nearly always much simpler and less cluttered” look based on an acceptance of the flat page.¹¹ In any case, Belgium is included in another recent traveling exhibition, “The Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe and America, 1880–1920: Design for the Modern World,” which originated at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and continued to the Milwaukee Art Museum and the Cleveland Museum of Art. The LACMA show also featured around 300 objects and a couple of model rooms, one of them Peter Behrens’s dining room from a German department

store, neatly dramatizing the benefits of good design for businesses and their middle-class customers. With their common themes and varied emphases, the LACMA and Victoria and Albert exhibitions testify to the wealth of available material and the sweeping implications of the subject.

In a way, deciding what to include or exclude becomes a matter of taste. An understandable impulse toward novelty pays off handsomely in the Victoria and Albert's decision to tackle Russia. In her essay Rosalind P. Blakesley draws attention to a Russian identity crisis in the mid-nineteenth-century debate between followers of Peter the Great's program of westernization and the Slavophiles engaged in ethnographic and archeological research, who studied and sought to revive indigenous folk traditions and vernacular architecture.¹² As with the William Morris model, the re-evaluation of folk art (*narodnoe iskusstvo*) led to commercially based *Kustar* craft. Designer Elena Polenova articulated the mission: "to capture the still-living art of the people, and give it the opportunity to develop." Polenova's painted cupboard (c. 1885–90), made at the Abramtsevo artists' colony furniture workshop, translates peasant embroidery motifs into "wooden lace" in a lively, asymmetrical façade. Sergie Malyatin's oak chair (c. 1900), from the Talashkino artists' colony, has a solid Arts and Crafts chunkiness, with the oversized, squared-off stylized sunflowers taking an Aesthetic Movement emblem toward modernism. Anna Pogosskaya, another member of the Talashkino colony, heard Morris lecture at the second Arts and Crafts Society exhibition in London in 1889. Ruskin was also influential, as seen in the medievalist enthusiasm of the Tretyakov Gallery's elaborate brickwork and polychromy. Fedor Shekhtel's pavilion for the 1901 Glasgow International Exhibition exemplified the taste for ogee gables and towers that mimicked the *bogatyr* helmet or peasant woman's *kokoshnik* headdress. The wonderful illustrator Ivan Bilbin's design for a scene from *Maria Morevna* (1900–01) has the charm of a Walter Crane toy-book. It depicts a cottage interior with a blue-and-white tiled stove and embroidered curtains that Morris would have loved. The scene is framed by a border of stylized folkloric motifs, including a pair of inquisitive birds. Bilbin moved resolutely into the avant-garde as a designer for Serge Diaghilev's Ballet Russes. This may seem far removed from Victorian Britain, but is consistent with Morris's role as storyteller and poet. He knew how invigorating the old legends could be.

One final piece merits discussion, an oak cabinet by Finnish designer Armas Lindgren (1874–1929), notable for its clean lines, blonde wood, metal hinges and delicate detailing. While part of Finland's National Romantic style, it has an Art Deco feel. Lindgren belonged to a Helsinki firm with Eliel Saarinen, father of the celebrated modernist architect Eero. In this cabinet—as in the works of Finland's most famous twentieth-century architect, Alvar Aalto—we see the feeling for timber that reminds us that Finland is a country of forests. In a world grown more aware of ecological imperatives and cultural

diversity, there is something immediately appealing about Arts and Crafts work—grounded in honest craftsmanship, proud of local traditions without being isolationist and full of imaginative vitality.

NOTES

1. *International Arts and Crafts*, edited by Karen Livingstone and Linda Parry (London: Victoria and Albert Publications, 2005).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
3. “*The Beauty of Life*”: *William Morris and the Art of Design*, edited by Diane Waggoner (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003).
4. *International Arts and Crafts*, p. 153.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Susie Harries, “Thoroughly Modern Mingei,” *Times Literary Supplement* (May 20, 2005), pp. 15–16.
7. Isabelle Anscombe and Charlotte Gere, *Arts and Crafts in Britain and America* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1978), pp. 43–44.
8. *International Arts and Crafts*, p. 12.
9. See *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts: Symbolism in Britain 1860–1910*, edited by Andrew Wilton and Robert Upstone (London: Tate Gallery, 1997).
10. John Russell Taylor, *The Art Nouveau Book in Britain* (New York: Taplinger, 1979), p. 55.
11. *Ibid.* p. 58.
12. *International Arts and Crafts*, p. 258.