

Address Delivered to the Colorado Arts and Crafts Society Gathering of the Guilds, May 8, 2010, by Philip Normand.

I WANT TO WELCOME you all to the first Colorado Arts and Crafts Society Gathering of the Guilds. We know that there was little planning time for this event and we are so pleased that you have shown such great enthusiasm toward the idea. We want to thank you all for participating and helping to bring this together. Your openness and support in the face of so many of your own shows and events is gratifying and enlivening to us. We have great hopes for the future.

The world of contemporary craft and artisanship has gone through a lot of change in recent years. I am only peripherally aware of some of the discussions and critiques that have been batted around as to the place of craft in the current market and its future. I only know that as a Society devoted to the enjoyment and promotion of what we see as an aesthetic directly related to the Arts and Crafts Movement, we appreciate the experience, the feel, the skill, of true craftsmanship and the arts by which it is expressed. We believe that each of you is, in some way, closely allied to the ethos of the Movement, and though the art and the craft worlds have changed greatly in expression over the last 100 years, the honesty, grace and simplicity that exemplify the original Movement still exists as an ideal in the heart of every artisan.

The intent of the Arts and Crafts Movement can be a complicated issue, depending on who you read and how cursory you want to be about it. But I think we can say that there are two major issues that the movement was about: first, the design of utilitarian domestic objects, and second, the problem of how to live in harmony with technology.

The primary concern of design reform was to change the way that manufactured goods were styled as objects to be used. Victorian manufactured products were made with the idea that the application of so-called “artistic” elements made for a cultured home. Japanese parasols and Renaissance cherubs sat side-by-side with stuffed animals and classical Greek columns. “We have no principles, no unity,” wrote Owen Jones, after seeing the Great Exhibition of 1851, “...each struggles fruitlessly, each produces in art novelty without beauty, or beauty without intelligence.”

The need to adjust to the overwhelming new technology of factory manufacture and its effects on environment and humanity spurred a new regard for the problem of how to live with it. The machine and its factories destroyed the environment, the landscape was blighted, factory towns created miserable living conditions, and factory work was dangerous and dehumanizing. Technology was setting the conditions of life in the service of commerce and people were being forced to align themselves with it in order to make a living.

Both Pugin and Ruskin, now considered the spiritual guides of the Arts and Crafts movement, were concerned with how form reflected spiritual content. This expression of the inner human was the “art” element of the Arts and Crafts.

Both laid out general principles of design that allowed designers to think beyond the historically determined decoration such as Owen Jones had compiled in *A Grammar of Ornament*. Principles such as the absence of features “which are not necessary for convenience, construction or propriety,” and “that all ornament should consist of the essential construction of the building,” we think of now as basic tenets of Arts and Crafts design: simplicity of form and honest construction. A sense of “fidelity to place”—that local, natural, materials should

be used—can certainly be found in the ideal of harmony between the man-made and nature that is expressed in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Ruskin specified that beauty could be found through the imitation of, or inspiration from, nature; that boldness and imperfection reflected the soulfulness of men; and that novelty for the sake of novelty only provokes disorder.

Through time, William Morris, Arthur Mackmurdo, William Lethaby, Lewis Day, John Sedding, in England, and Gustav Stickley, Louis Tiffany, Ernest Batchelder and Frank Lloyd Wright, in America—among many others—refined and promoted these principles in their own work to bring into being the changes to domestic culture that we recognize as the fruits of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Though the ideals of the Movement lost ground through the mid-twentieth century, the revival that began in the 1970s has shown that they are not only still of interest, but worthy of serious reconsideration in the digital age. We are still trying to adjust to technology. The digital world has exposed great fractures in the elusive cohesion of cultures and societies. Art has become more and more a personal expression exhibiting experimentation but unable to find grounding in the heart. Manners and mores are changing faster with each generation and the assault on nature, the environment, has become worldwide. Technology and industry set the conditions by which we live and we find that we are still trying to determine who will be the master. Economies are determined by global concerns and more and more people are at a loss as to how to gain simple financial stability.

Over the last few years a resurgence of interest in self-directed handcraft by entrepreneurs seeking to establish cottage businesses has opened fertile ground for renewed appreciation and evolution of the links between humanity's need for a harmonious life and its expression in the objects we surround ourselves with. A revival and application of the principles that guided the Arts and Crafts Movement can stimulate a re-focusing of small craft production. Many of these crafters are activating awareness of modern ecological issues. They are using recovered materials, re-purposing castoffs and discovering new ways to recycle. Working this way is very much within the ethos of the Arts and Crafts Movement and its concerns of how to live and work.

It may be that the new Arts and Crafts Movement can now get closer to its ideal of producing small sustainable economies that reconnect creativity with deeper human values; can move away from design as fashion and establish a new balance between man, nature and technology.

We see the guilds as being the true guides in this resurgence. It is the guilds that have a support structure to encourage craft and art that is not beholden to trends but can partake of a knowledge of design and art history and a solid understanding of design, materials and craftsmanship.

It is our hope that a year from now we can offer an exhibit which will speak to the roots of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Not by the imitation of any purely historical revivals—we have seen enough copies of Stickley, Greene and Greene and Tiffany—but by showing the same grace, delight and love of nature that those forbearers brought forth. Useful, honest pieces fit for the home, showing the hand of their maker and reflecting that deeper place of harmony in life that goes beyond the mad rush that a digital, ever-changing technology compels us to inhabit.

We hope to work with you to make this happen. To help guide those who are newly entering the artisan crafts; to stimulate a balance between experiment and utility. We seek a revival of the beauty of timelessness, the recovery of true art.

Let us begin today.