

DESIGNS *for* OUR TIMES

In our fast-paced, digital world, the simple ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement resonate more than ever

WORDS BY KATE LANGRISH

Take a walk along your local high street and it can be hard to miss fabric, furniture and even fashion inspired by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement designers who followed him. But could this current revival go beyond a simple fondness for nature-themed designs? The original movement was driven more by a set of ideals than by style. Concerns about mass-production processes, sustainability and the gradual dehumanisation of society were revolutionary in late 19th-century Britain, but they seem just as relevant to today's technology-rich, time-poor society. The Arts and Crafts movement marked a shift in attitudes, when people began to value handmade products, and question the social and environmental impacts of mechanisation – ideas that resonate strongly today.

AN ARTISAN REVIVAL

Many of those involved with the Arts and Crafts movement were influenced by the work of designer and manufacturer William Morris, who was inspired by the writing of art critic John Ruskin. "Ruskin wrote

a series of essays in the 1860s that were a reaction to the rapid growth of industrialisation," explains Kirsty Hartsiotis, who curates a renowned Arts and Crafts collection at The Wilson Art Gallery and Museum, Cheltenham. "He believed that the small, repetitive processes of industrial manufacturing were dehumanising, and that separating designing from making could be detrimental not only to the end product, but also to the health of the workers."

Morris's goal was ambitious: to provide tasteful but affordable alternatives to mass production – items that were beautiful, well-made, practical and produced in a way that allowed makers to remain connected with, and take pleasure from, the process. A similar appreciation of artisan skills is a growing trend today: over the past few years, the rise of Etsy, Not on the High Street and other online portals for small-scale, handmade pieces shows just how much demand is increasing. And, like Morris and his contemporaries, this might be driven by a rejection of new technology – in our case, not just factory production, but also the omnipresence of plastic and gadgetry. "Our ▶



ARTS AND CRAFTS REVIVAL

digital age can make us feel anonymous, so there is comfort in handmade items – they feel as though they are especially for us and no one else,” explains clinical psychologist Dr Catherine Huckle, from the University of Surrey. “There is also a growing push against big corporations and their ethics. Our power is limited against these, but we can express ourselves through our purchasing choices, so are choosing small independent producers instead.”

Quality of life for workers was a driving force for many in the Arts and Crafts movement. “They saw that factory workers were living almost non-human lives, and tried to change this. For Morris, that meant paying his workers a decent wage; then architect and designer CR Ashbee took it further by creating a guild in which workers were part of a true co-operative with voting rights,” Kirsty Hartsiotis explains. “The workers’ rights we have today across Europe are in part down to the observations of people such as Ruskin and Morris. I think they would be saddened that, nearly two centuries later, workers are still exploited and poorly treated in parts of the world.”

LAYERS OF INSPIRATION

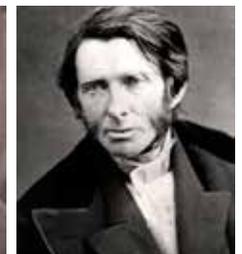
Look at Morris’s wallpaper patterns, Ashbee’s jewellery designs and the motifs in William De Morgan’s tiles, and it’s easy to see how nature was a key influence. “The movement was full of men and women who spent time in the country. As a small boy, Morris developed a love of nature wandering around Epping Forest – it’s even said he would break out of Marlborough School to explore the downs,” Kirsty Hartsiotis says. The Wilson holds a collection of Arts and Crafts designer Ernest Gimson’s sketchbooks, which he used when out walking. “Designers like Gimson were also interested in how the natural world was depicted through art, looking at old embroideries and plasterwork in historic houses.”

Inspiration also came from further afield. “People often overlook the influence of historic textiles from the Middle East on Morris,” says Helen Elletson, curator at the William Morris Society, London. “He was an expert in this area, working as an advisor on Persian carpets to the South Kensington Museum – now known as the V&A.”

This diversity is one of the reasons the patterns have such enduring appeal, says Claire Vallis, the current creative director of Morris & Co, which holds many of the original wooden blocks from the company Morris set up in 1875. “Morris is one of the most talented pattern makers in modern history. The historical influences he used gives them a longevity and beauty. He was an incredible forward thinker, which is why his designs are still relevant today and will continue to be.”

THE SIMPLE LIFE

Although individual patterns could be elaborate, the overall Arts and Crafts aesthetic embraced simplicity. Take the pared-back furniture designs of Gimson and the Barnsley brothers – their rustic style showcased the materials and celebrated craftsmanship with features such as exposed joints. The reaction against the ▶



PREVIOUS PAGES
Lowther fabric by Sidney Mawson. The wallpaper (inset) is Morris & Co’s Pure Loden (stylelibrary.com) FROM TOP Kelmescott Manor, Morris’s Cotswolds home; calico printing at the Morris & Co workshop in Merton Abbey Mills; William Morris (left); John Ruskin; William De Morgan Fantastic Bird tile; CR Ashbee pendant; Morris would use as many as 30 blocks to build up a paper design





excessive ornamentation of many Victorian drawing rooms was embodied in Morris's golden rule: "Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful." Today, decluttering enthusiast Marie Kondo's direction to keep only items that "spark joy" echoes this sentiment. "As with Kondo, the Arts and Crafts aesthetic is not about minimalism, but paring back to things that have a purpose or bring beauty to your living spaces," Kirsty Hartsiotis says.

This idea of simplicity extended to the way many Arts and Crafts pioneers believed life should be lived. Although the movement began in cities, a desire to live the 'simple life' meant many moved to the countryside. "Morris wanted to provide his workers with a more idyllic countryside setting, so moved his workshop to the riverside at Merton Abbey Mills, Surrey. Others followed his example, with CR Ashbee relocating his Guild of Handicraft from the East End of London to Chipping Campden, and Gimson and the Barnsleys also moving to the Cotswolds," Helen Elletson says. "Their legacy continues in the countryside. The descendants of silversmith George Hart – part of Ashbee's Guild – are still running the family business in Chipping Campden today."

ENJOYING THE PROCESS

Sustainability lay at the heart of Arts and Crafts ideology. Morris and others were concerned about the impact of industrialised cities on the landscapes and people in them. They also cared about the continuity of traditional skills – such as embroidery, silversmithing and enamelling – establishing art schools and technical colleges to revive them. Morris would not introduce any technique until he had mastered it himself (he had a weaving loom in his bedroom, and once complained of being blue up to the elbows after experimenting with natural dyes). But it is perhaps the notion of taking pleasure in making things

that is most appealing to us today – after all, what can be more 'mindful' than the in-the-moment process of creating something beautiful? It perhaps goes some way to explaining why the trend for craft-based activities is currently so popular. "In many ways, we face similar problems. We're still caught up in a work ethic that is potentially damaging our health, feeling we're engaged in what Morris called 'useless toil' without the opportunity to exercise our creativity," Kirsty Hartsiotis says. "Finding the flow that comes from making, or appreciating the craftsmanship of something handmade, lifts the spirits and is good for our wellbeing." Morris would approve.

FROM ABOVE LEFT A watercolour drawing of wisteria and flowering horse chestnut by Allan Francis Vigers; Arts and Crafts ladder-back chair; Morris & Co fabric and wallpaper from the archives; the Morris & Co block store; blockprinting with Morris's designs is still popular today

ARTS AND CRAFTS PLACES TO VISIT

BLACKWELL A large house in the Lake District built by Baillie Scott with impressive interiors. blackwell.org.uk

COURT BARN Museum in Chipping Campden devoted to craft and design including CR Ashbee. courtbarn.org.uk

DAVID PARR HOUSE A terraced house in Cambridge owned and furnished with patterns and decoration. Tours two days per week. davidparrhouse.org

EMERY WALKER'S HOUSE The former London home of Morris's friend is furnished with Morris & Co textiles and wallpapers. emerywalker.org.uk

KELMSCOTT HOUSE Visit the library and coach house of Morris's former London residence. williammorrisociety.org

KELMSCOTT MANOR Morris's home from 1871-1896 is filled with original pieces. sal.org.uk/kelmscott-manor

LITTLE HOLLAND HOUSE Property in Carshalton with a preserved interior. friendsofhoneywood.co.uk

RED HOUSE In Bexleyheath, designed by Philip Webb for William Morris in a red-brick gothic style. Features a hand-painted ceiling. nationaltrust.org.uk

RODMARTON MANOR Privately owned Cotswolds house built by Morris follower Ernest Barnsley. rodmarton-manor.co.uk

STANDEN House in West Sussex designed by Webb and decorated with Morris carpets, fabrics and wallpapers. nationaltrust.org.uk

THE WILLIAM MORRIS GALLERY Morris was born in this Georgian house in Walthamstow – it is now a museum dedicated to him. wmgallery.org.uk

THE WILSON Gallery and museum with furniture, ceramics, textiles and jewellery. cheltenhammuseum.org.uk